

# **Setting Free the Dragons: Feminist Fantastic Fiction as Protest Literature**

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## Introduction

This thesis looks at fantastic literature as social criticism from a feminist viewpoint. Some regard all fantastic writing as escapism, and like any type of literature it of course can be. However, fantastic fiction is also a genre well suited to social commentary, by the contrast it poses between the secondary and the world of the reader. The aim of this genre is to challenge the reader's view of reality, and what that reality could be like if readers dared think beyond the sometimes limiting factuality of the world they live in:

For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons, because they are afraid of freedom. (Le Guin 1979: 44)

The aim of this thesis is to describe some typical aspects of feminist fantastic fiction, to show what these novels regard as damaging effects caused by the construct of patriarchal domination, and how an alternative understanding of human existence in the world could help create healthy societies and contented individuals.

### **Fantastic fiction as feminist protest literature**

Fantastic fiction is a broad and many-faceted literary genre spanning sub-genres such as fantasy, science fiction, horror writing, detective fiction, utopian and dystopian writing. Fantastic or speculative writing in all its forms is a genre that resists categorisation. There are few, if any, clear distinctions between these sub-genres. Although some works are easier to classify than others, such as either fantasy or science fiction, most authors who use genre fiction as protest literature are concerned with not being restricted by the literary conventions of the sub-genre, thus creating works that use elements from different types of writing. Because these sub-genres blend into one another and are not easily classified and separated, many readers and critics use terms such as "SF" to denote either "speculative fiction", or "science fiction and fantasy".

Speculative fiction is a genre that allows the reader to observe events that are impossible, rare or even nonexistent in the reader's world. "The realistic fiction of today," writes Thelma J. Shinn, "is locked into current perceptions of reality – to, if you will, our cultural myths. Fantastic literature, on the other hand, has always been open to alternatives" (Shinn 1986: xi). It is this ability to imagine beyond the world we know that entices writers to use fantastic fiction as protest literature. By writing of another world which is not dependent upon our own way of thinking, writers can criticise attitudes or events in the real world without being hampered by demands for verisimilitude.

One of the concerns of modern-day fantastic writing has been to examine social structures and cultural ideals. Much fantastic writing of today incorporates critique of oppression and misuse of power, and looks at issues such as gender equality, resource management, and distribution of goods and power in a society. These are issues that deeply concern feminists. There is no surprise, therefore, that fantastic fiction has become popular to convey a feminist message. The fantasy universe contains an unlimited potential for rearranging the society we know and for criticising specific ways of thought that dominate the world we live in, providing an ideal thought experiment for changes in our own world: "I was free to imagine new ways of thinking about people and power, free to maneuver my characters into situations that don't exist," says the writer Octavia Butler. "For example, where is there a society in which men and women are honestly equal? Where do people not despise each other because of race or religion, class or ethnic origin?" (Butler in Shinn 1986: 10). Feminist fantastic fiction as a genre is well suited to question the inevitability of the "real world" the reader lives in, by indicating through its discussion of reality and illusion that the society we live in is also a social construct. Cranny-Francis says of feminist fantasy that it shows the fragmentation of the real, revealing the real as a negotiation of conflicting discourses engendered by specific socio-economic conditions and denying the definition of the real commonly proposed in realist texts as an essentially unchanging product of an essentially unchanging "human nature" (Cranny-Francis 1990: 76). By indicating that what we consider "real" is actually a social construct, speculative fiction can offer images of other worlds that make the reader question the inevitability of our own world.

Feminist fantastic writing as protest literature is largely a feature stemming from the 1960s and 1970s. Before that time, fantastic writing was mainly meant for male readers. For science fiction the early writing was *by* and *for* young men, what we now refer

to as hardcore Space Opera. Both male and female characters were stereotypes and the plots were more action-oriented than concerned with plausible characterisation. Women who wanted to read science fiction had to accept a male point of view, as there were simply no female characters that women readers would want to identify with. Kathleen Cioffi, in her essay “Types of Feminist Fantasy and Science Fiction”, traces the history of fantastic writing in terms of characterisation: In the 1950s and 60s a group of science fiction writers called the “New Wave” started writing stories with more in-depth characterisation. At that time women were still incomplete as characters, playing a limited number of roles. In fantasy, female characters were those of “goddesses, witches, fairies or devil-women”, and in neither fantasy nor science fiction did they have “any psychological reality other than the stereotypes in which they were cast”. By the late 1960s and early 1970s however, the effects of the women’s movement and the efforts of new female writers had started creating female characters that went beyond stereotypes (Cioffi 1985: 84). Since that time, there has been a large production of feminist fantastic fiction, with varying degrees of feminist themes or simply novels featuring credible female heroes. These books cover a great range from social critique to pure entertainment, and have even spawned parodies such as the short story collections *Chicks in Chainmail*, or from its predecessor *Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind*, the entertaining short story “Clichés from Outer Space” by Joanna Russ.

Notable writers of the early period of feminist fantastic fiction include names such as Joanna Russ (*The Female Man*), Marion Zimmer Bradley (the Darkover novels, *The Mists of Avalon*), James Tiptree Jr. (“The Women Men Don’t See”), Marge Piercy (*Woman on the Edge of Time*) and Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*). “Though perhaps not all these women would consider themselves feminists,” says Cioffi, “their fiction shares many feminist concerns, and differs so markedly from that written by male science fiction and fantasy authors that it can be spoken of as a sub-genre: feminist fantasy and science fiction” (Cioffi 1985: 83-84). Cioffi believes feminist fantastic writing stands out on two points: The characterisation of female characters and the focus on relationships between men and women and their surroundings (Cioffi 1985 : 84-85).

The writers of feminist fantastic fiction have tried to deal with gender roles in a variety of ways: Societies built on role reversal; separatist utopias; androgyny; introducing a third gender or other ploys that eliminate or decrease the importance of biological sex as a differentiating factor in society. Not all of these have functioned well as social critique.

Tales featuring androgynous characters, such as Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, may function as a theoretical exploration of the social construct of gender, but have been criticised for offering no practical role models or suggestions for change of societies that are locked into two biological sexes. Similarly, "novels that engage in simple role reversal are no more feminists than their counterparts, such characters are simply 'hero[es] in drag'" (Lissa Paul in Trites c1997: 5). Role-reversal, says Cranny-Francis, tends to fail because it does not change the role itself (Cranny-Francis:1990: 84).

Early feminist speculative fiction has almost invariably been called science fiction, largely because it functioned as a protest against a genre written exclusively for men. In recognition of the potential of genre fiction to influence large groups of readers, The Women's Press started their own science fiction series in order to present alternatives to the stereotypical presentations of female characters common in contemporary science fiction. Their aim was to make fantastic fiction written by and about women more easily available, and to present books that contained plots with more fully developed female characters. Fantasy has today largely taken over from science fiction as focus for feminist statements. It is common for popular works that aim to function more as entertainment than critical explorations of gender to still incorporate feminist elements in the plot, such as female heroes, avoidance of stereotypes and humanist themes of quality. Displays of equality thereby become a natural part of the story, rather than having to be problematised and singled out as unique. Definitions of fantasy as a genre are usually based on the supposition that the fantasy world deviates from the real world in terms of rationality. In *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide* the following definition is presented: "Fantasy, as a literary genre, is composed of works in which nonrational phenomena play a significant part. That is, they are works in which events occur, or places or creatures exist, that could not occur or exist according to rational standards or scientific explanations". It is this "presence of nonrational phenomena" that is the "principal criterion for distinguishing fantasy from history or from other types of literature" (Tymn 1979: 3-4). The events taking place in the fantasy universe are nonrational when judged according to the standards of the readers' experiences of their own world.

Feminist fantasy is a varied group of writing, spanning from wildly invented secondary worlds to more moderate stories approaching magical realism in style. The sword and sorcery-variant situated in a medieval setting is perhaps what most people associate with fantasy writing. Although sorcerers and sword-swingers comprise a large

portion of fantasy universes, they by no means constitute the whole of the genre. The book *Fantasy Literature: A core collection and reference guide* attempts to define two major criteria for classifying fantasy, namely setting and the use of non-rational phenomena. In *high fantasy* the plot takes place in a secondary world where supernatural or magical events can be explained according to the laws that govern that world, such as in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In *low fantasy*, on the other hand, the plot is set in the primary world, or the world of the reader. Because this universe - our universe - is governed by natural laws, nonrational events in this realm cannot be explained. As such, they might be said to have a higher degree of impact on the reader than stories that concern a world which in no way is related to our own.

This would perhaps explain why writers of pronounced feminist fantasy tend to play down what many would consider typically "fantastic" elements. In general, Tom Moylan sees this realist restriction as only pertaining to utopian narratives and science fiction: "Opposed to other fantastic forms, utopias and science fiction practice an estrangement that is cognitively consistent with nature as it is known or with the imagined natural laws in the particular text. That is, the estranged world of utopia must appear realistic, must not partake of the impossibilities of the supernatural or the naturally undoable" (Moylan 1986: 34). Although fantasy is one of the variants of fantastic writing that is least bound by realism, writers of feminist fantasy seem compelled to present fantastic societies that are not so unbelievable that they cannot be related to the world the reader lives in. They are careful not to allow the common genre distinctions of fantasy to become so strong that they distract from the main message of the book. Cranny-Francis warns of the danger of fantasy writing becoming simply escapist literature in that "the techniques used to construct the secondary world of the text may alienate, rather than estrange, some readers. The secondary world may become a kind of compensatory dream or wish fulfilment which enables readers to avoid engagement with the real" (Cranny-Francis 1990: 78). There tends to be a certain shortage of gnomes, elves, faeries, orcs, trolls, and witches in feminist fantasy. Wizards and sorcerers are usually more common, and often they function to centre the plot on a theme of humanitarian or ecological balance, or the cost of exercising power over others. The sorcerers must draw power from somewhere, either from themselves or from renewable sources with white magic, or through abusing other people or the land by using black magic. In cases where magic is used by women, it is often seen as an example of female mastery of the natural world equated with a male

power over science. In Terry Pratchett's *Equal Rites* the objections against a girl child inheriting a wizard's power exemplifies the difference between the earth-based sorcery considered acceptable for female witches, and the sorcery based on academic learning restricted to male wizards. Magic, when used as a tool often becomes acceptable and normal in the secondary world in which it is used. Thus in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover novels, the use of psychic powers called *laran* becomes a normal part of society and eventually is used in a scientific manner to complement a feudal, unindustrialised world.

Novels defined as "utopian" or "dystopian" writing tend to be called just that because they either do not fit easily into either the fantasy or science fiction category, or because their critique of the real world and/or a secondary world is so obviously strong that they can be called nothing else. The term "Utopia", meaning "no place" is taken from the Thomas More's *Utopia* published in 1516. *Utopia* describes a future society seen as ideal by More. Utopia can be a problematic label if it is seen as an emblem of the unattainable, as it can indicate an impossible perfection. However, Cranny-Francis believes literary utopian societies are not meant to be templates for the future, but rather that "the utopian figure is viewed as part of a textual strategy aimed at politicizing readers through the deconstruction of dominant ideologies and the positioning of the reader as active subject" (Cranny-Francis 1990: 109). The effect of a literary utopia comes from the reader's realisation that the ideology governing his/her society is a construct, and that this constitutes a possibility for change. In the need to relate the reader's world to that of the utopian world, utopian writing needs to be even stricter than fantasy when it comes to describing non-realistic events:

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This focus on what is possible both limits and challenges the writer to create a society which is both bound to, and yet so far removed from the reader's world that it creates a juxtaposition between what *is* and what *could be*.

Speculative fiction presents images of what a possible (and for some ideal) society would look like from a feminist writer's point of view. As opposed to science fiction which



is mainly used to describe human alienation, both feminist fantasy and utopian writing often focus on themes of unity or connection. For example, it is typical for feminist utopias to encourage a flat power structure to rid oneself of the patriarchal domination seen as responsible for the oppression of women: “The dreams of the individual are nurtured by a supportive, nonauthoritarian environment” (Anderson 1976: 14). Most feminist writers describe men as included in these societies, with the understanding that utopia cannot be based on prejudicing men. When the perfect world debases men to promote the comfort of women, the quest for utopia is described as a failed endeavour that brings little happiness to the main characters, such as in Pamela Sargent’s *The Shore of Women*, and Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*.

The connection between the domination of woman and nature encouraged through ecofeminism is a very common feature of feminist fantastic fiction. Susan Janice Anderson comments on feminist fantastic writers’ preoccupation with what she calls “ecological sanity”: “In a truly nonsexist society, it seems, as both sexes become more fully human, they also live in greater harmony with the natural world” (Anderson 1976: 14). The holistic thought underlying most feminist fantasy emphasises the importance of caring for the natural world to ensure a healthy society. The absence of domination as a governing principle for society is extended to include the natural world. Nature is seen a partner rather than an underling in its relationship with human society. Humanitarian ideas are extended to caring for the natural world and allowing it to influence both the individual and the society as a whole. Some of these depictions that equate the liberation of women with the liberation of nature place what some feel is undue emphasis on nature’s role in human society. Feminist fantasy and utopian fiction have largely taken over from science fiction as feminist protest literature. There is some concern in this because these alternative worlds tend to focus greatly on the importance of mothering or nurturing, creating an image of women as natural caregivers in a unity which at times engulfs the individual. Also, there is a tendency to see fantasy as a sub-genre that excludes the use of science. In a society built on a cultural tradition of a dualistic split between nature and culture, feminist fantasy in particular risks binding women so close to the natural world that it excludes science and other expressions of human culture.

Marion Zimmer Bradley and Marge Piercy describe a world where women as well as men have power, and where the society is governed by certain principles associated with women. The novels are chosen because they both deal with what one might call “the

Mother's world". Both *The Mists of Avalon* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* describe a society ruled by, if not directly by women, then at least an ideal image of what women represent – the role of caretaker of the natural world and people around her. It could be said that “mothering”, in the sense of being responsible for and having the ability to influence the fate of the society in which one lives, is the most important aspect of these novels. The primary texts chosen for this thesis are all part of the range of fantasy publications in the 1970s and 1980s now renowned as the most essential feminist fantasy because of their clear feminist message.

*The Mists of Avalon* is one of the most well known alternative renderings of the legend of Arthur. This high fantasy novel discusses women's roles in a pre-Christian Celtic society, which is by many believed to have given women a strong position in religious and civic governance. In opposition to this, early Christianity in Britain is shown to be subjugating and marginalizing women into passive objects disconnected from the structures of power and isolated from the world around them. In this narrative, patriarchal Christianity breaks up the focus of the older Mother Goddess religion on the unity of all living things and the power of earth-centered religion, by imposing a dichotomy of heaven/hell, good/evil, man/woman, in which woman always ends up on the losing side.

Another classic feminist fantastic narrative is Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, a utopian rendering of the alienation of Connie, a poor Chicana woman in contemporary society. The story of Connie shows how a society governed by patriarchal duality removes and denigrates that which does not fit in, and how the Other finally strikes back by daring to define itself and a new world. Connie escapes the dehumanizing oppression of confinement in a psychiatric hospital by mentally fleeing to a future society in which the individual is respected as part of a whole. The novel is clearly focused on the discussion of human values and the relationship between the individual and the group, as well as being heavily involved in a debate of environmental stability.

### **Feminist criticism**

Feminist criticism started as an established separate type of criticism along with the growing focus on gender inequality inherent in the 1960s women's movement (Benstock 2002: 153). This has led to a variety of different approaches, allowing feminist critics studying literature to borrow from what Ellen Messer-Davidow calls “the smorgasbord” of traditional schools – “archetypal, marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, semiotic,

deconstructive, and hermeneutic, to name a few” (Messer-Davidow 1989: 63). In addition to these approaches, Black and lesbian feminist criticism has also contributed to challenge our view of gender roles.

Although feminist criticism over the years has been, and continues to be, highly diverse, Abrams summarizes some common characteristics: Societies in the Western world are basically patriarchal (“ruled by the father”) and work to lower women’s status by teaching them to independently uphold their assigned role as the negative opposite to man. In this system masculinity has had associations such as “active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative”, whereas the feminine “by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional”. This dogma has affected the writers of major literary works and made them subordinate female characters to the extent that female readers must choose between seeing themselves as outsiders or read within the context of masculine values (Abrams c1999: 89-90).

Many fantasy writers and critics comment on the same issues as regular feminist critics, but without using the same tools – the theories and established language of contemporary feminist criticism. Marleen S. Barr, in her book *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, has commented on the advent of female voices in what she calls “speculative fiction”, which includes “feminist utopias, science fiction, fantasy, and sword and sorcery” (Barr 1987: xxi). According to Barr, there is a parallel development between speculative fiction written by women and the second wave of American feminism, starting with “Statement of Problem”, going on to “Radical Feminist Solutions” and ending with “Moderate Womanist Solutions”. The problem has been to persuade the critics of speculative fiction (most of whom are men) to take an interest in the new woman writers in combination with feminist theory (Barr c1987: xii). Barr strongly believes that feminist theory should be used in everyday life, and one such medium is fiction:

Speculative fiction in the best cases makes the patriarchal structures which constrain women obvious and perceptible. That is why these texts are so important. Speculative fiction is thus a powerful educational tool which uses exaggeration to make women’s lack of power visible and discussable. [...] The texts are popular and accessible – and certainly not revered by traditional scholars. The worst thing we can do is to foster an attitude of separation between these popular texts and theoretical feminist insights about literature and culture. (Barr 1987: xx)

## Woman as the Other

Where is she?  
Activity/passivity  
Sun/Moon  
Culture/Nature  
Day/Night

Father/Mother  
Head/Heart  
Intelligible/Palpable  
Logos/Pathos  
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.  
Matter, concave, ground – where steps are taken, holding- and dumping-ground.  
Man  
Woman

(Cixous c1986: 63)

Dividing the world into dualities in which the central party lies in oneself is hardly a new feature in human history, as Simone de Beauvoir points out in her book *The Second Sex*, published 1949. “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought”, says Beauvoir, “we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object” (Beauvoir 1997: 17).

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir expounded on her theory that woman has been posited as man’s negative Other, an object to be acted upon rather than acting on her own behalf: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (Beauvoir 1997: 16). Woman is the object to the man who considers himself the subject. Once the subject seeks to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is none the less a necessity to him: he attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself” (Beauvoir 1997: 171). The Other is a tool of self-definition for the subject. By debasing the Other, man raises himself up towards the sublime.

Beauvoir further wrote that this position has served to give a number of benefits to women, and thus their Otherness is rarely battled. In addition to material wealth and security, this relationship also offers a woman a justification for her existence, allowing her to escape the struggle of defining her own goals and place in the world (Beauvoir 1997:

21). However, in a master-slave relationship the slave will never have the freedom to act as an independent being as long as it is up to the master to define the role of the slave. In her most famous quote, Beauvoir maintains that woman's position as the Other is not unavoidable: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". By this she means that though women are biologically female, they are taught to act a feminine part which posits them as the Other. The Other is a socially created role, and by examining how it is constructed it can also be destroyed.

Another French feminist critic, Hélène Cixous, later expanded upon the hierarchical placement of the Other based on the theories of the deconstructuralist Jacques Derrida. Derrida maintained that "Western thought is grounded in a series of binary oppositions: light/darkness, good/evil, soul/body, life/death, mind/matter" in which the terms relate hierarchically to each other (Benstock 2002: 165). Cixous focused Derrida's theory on gender, claiming that "the less favoured term is always feminine and Other – so that the feminine is always conceived of as a negative proposition" (Robbins 2000: 169). Woman is thereby defined by what she is lacking when compared to a man.

Growing up in Algeria Cixous saw how the French imperialists treated inhabitants who were dissimilar from those in power, in terms of origin, colour, ideology or sex: "Thanks to some annihilating dialectical magic. I saw that the great, noble, "advanced" countries established themselves by expelling what was strange; excluding it but not dismissing it; enslaving it. A commonplace gesture of History: there have to be *two* races – the masters and the slaves." (Cixous c1986?: 70). Cixous built her theories on her own experiences of being the "alien" in a culture in which she felt she did not belong:

What is the "Other"? If it is truly the "other," there is nothing to say; it cannot be theorized. The "other" escapes me. It is elsewhere, outside: absolutely other. It doesn't settle down. But in History, of course, what is called "other" is an alterity that does settle down, that falls into the dialectical circle. It is the other in a hierarchically organized relationship in which the same is what rules, names, defines, and assigns "its" other. (Cixous c1986: 71)

Cixous put a great deal of emphasis on the power of language and naming, and on breaking the patriarchal hold over language by writing in what she called *écriture féminine*, a style of writing which "enacts a resistance to a closed system of duality, through a mode of writing which is rhetorical, excessive and poetic rather than logical, ordered and prosaic" (Robbins 2000: 171). She saw women's writing, especially *écriture féminine*, as a powerful tool in deconstructing the established bond between "woman" and the negative

content that the word signified: “It is by writing from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence”(Cixous in Benstock 2002: 169). In *The Laugh of the Medusa* she claims that even the act of writing is an act of subversion in itself as the object refuses to acknowledge the main requirement of its role – namely passivity. The silent, passive Other daring to name itself has the power to change what language signifies.

### **Social constructionism vs. gynocentric biological essentialism**

For feminists the concept of gender roles is used to separate social expectations from biological sex. Some see gender as the social manifestation of biological sexual difference between men and women.

gender differences have tended to be seen principally in biological terms within our society; moreover, women have been depicted as passive victims of their biology in ways that men, in general, have not. That is, women as a group are often portrayed as having an underlying biological nature, an essence of femininity, which provides constraints on what is individually possible for them. The social position of women thus becomes seen as determined – and limited – by their biology. (Birke 1986: 2)

This attitude views biology as a strong determining factor affecting social behaviour, and is therefore called biological determinism. Others view gender roles as purely social constructs, unrelated to biology. The leading general belief in the British Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s was that biology was not important in shaping us as women or men. Some feminists felt this to be an inadequate explanation, as they saw biology to some extent responsible in shaping the way we apprehend the notion of gender. Also, “biological experiences do contribute to the way we experience our lives as women” (Birke 1986: viii-ix). Another reason why some feminists saw biology as a contributing factor was that they felt that in order to combat biological arguments, feminists could not disregard biology completely, but had to be ready to combat biological reasoning ( Birke 1986: 3). As a reaction to the strong insistence on biology being unimportant, there has been much written from a biological viewpoint in the 1980s.

Essentially, opinions differ in two main directions. One point of view is based on the theory of social constructionism, believing that gender roles are a result of social pressure and acquired behaviour. To free women from acting out the role of the Other, it is necessary to give both men and women the freedom to act according to their individual

personality rather than expect them to embody certain behaviour and attitudes because they happen to be biologically male or female. The aim of this approach is to break the duality between “man” and “woman” which has made woman into the Other.

The other alternative is to varying degrees based on biological essentialism: “The suggestion that traditionally masculine and feminine traits (e)merge as a direct result of physical sexual ambiguity is fundamentally essentialist” (Rosinsky 1984: x). Although biological essentialism has tended to support “patriarchal stereotypes of women as naturally limited, inferior beings”, in what Rosinsky calls “androcentric essentialism”, in later years the alternative “gynocentric essentialism” has come up, i.e. regarding women’s special characteristics as more valuable than those belonging to men. These are “abilities which furthermore do not preclude women’s fulfilling traditionally male roles” (Rosinsky 1984: x).

Androcentric essentialism claims that to turn what are believed to be the special characteristics of women into something positive, will best break the Other’s negative association. The dualism between man and woman is still present, but embodying the characteristics believed to be special for “woman” need not be negative, but can rather be considered a source of strength.

Feminists who adhere to biological essentialism believe the essential point is for women to take pride in their unique abilities, and that the best way to ensure equality is to increase the status of women’s experiences. This “essentialist position, with its gynocentric emphasis on women’s spirituality, physiology and history, has led to a reclaiming and renaming of “woman”[...]and has both fostered, and been fostered by, a resurgence of interest in matriarchal cultures and religions” (Rosinsky 1984: 1). This interest is visible in later works on feminist spirituality.

Gynocentric essentialism is proposed in various degrees by different groups. Some believe that the traits considered specifically feminine can also be fostered in and shared by men. However, because gynocentric essentialism is founded on biological differences there is a very real danger that this theory, if taken to extremes, will discriminate against men whose biology precludes them from the bodily experiences that women go through: “At its most inflexible, gynocentric essentialism may be perceived as sexism which discriminates against biological males, rather than females. Its corollary, androcentric essentialism, is the ideology underlying patriarchy’s historical discrimination against women” (Rosinsky 1984: 1).

Those who oppose the idea of biological essentialism see gender roles as a result of acquired behaviour, thereby indicating that certain conditions in society are responsible for creating a role that women are expected to play. From this point of view, true equality can only come from freeing men and women from being defined according to their biological sex. Critics such as Toril Moi and Nina Björk front the belief that the best way to ensure equality for women is to regard women first and foremost as human beings, rather than maintain the old dichotomy between women and men. Björk's book, *Under det rosa täcket: Om kvinnlighetens vara och feministiska strategier*, questions the wisdom of defining women as a group through forcing them into a common, constructed image of womanhood: "Finding a natural connection between woman and femininity is the primary task of patriarchy, the main condition for dividing humankind into men and women and then allocate power to these groups" (Björk 1999: 16. My translation). The emphasis on women as Women prevents them from being seen as people free to develop their own personalities without being forced into a ready-made image, argues Björk (Björk 1999: 38). The problem in defining women according to biology, is that it implies a similarity between women because they share the same biology. Woman is her body, and all women are the same. "Their references to woman's multiplicity and heterogeneity paradoxically imply a simple, unified "she" that neglects the real differences in the material conditions of women"(Benstock 2002: 172).

Björk accuses feminism of caring more for the image of Woman than for women's individual experiences. The struggle must be, she insists, to liberate women from expectations of conduct and appearance by denying that there is an archetypal Woman that all women exemplify. Björk believes that investing women with all good characteristics to replace former negative connotations is a temptation that is much too large a simplification of the world:

If a word has been given meaning extending its own definition and if these meanings are negative, it is tempting for those signified by this word to give it positive meaning: "Black is beautiful", "gays represent radical protest", "women are better at caring for the environment" [...] but as the words still produce associations and not just definitions they continue to shape life for those whom the words represent. This is not the task of feminism; to be a woman should not be something good – it should be something uninteresting. Only then can we be free to shape our identity irrespective of biological sex. [...] Feminism does not need to be conscious of woman's *essence*, it needs only to be conscious of her *position*. (Björk, 1999: 14. My translation)



To further complicate matters, the discussion on how to liberate the other has also included the problem of “saming”, as Naomi Schor explains: “If othering involves attributing to the objectified other a difference that serves to legitimate her oppression, saming denies the objectified other the right to her difference” (Andermahr 1997: 157).

According to Birke throughout the 1970s and 1980s most feminists saw the theory of gender as a social construct as the only possible substitute for biological determinism (Birke 1986: x). Today feminists have again dared to brave the discussion on biological essentialism, but are careful to separate essentialism from determinism, which is considered a stronger determining factor for human behaviour. Toril Moi believes that biological essentialism need not be harmful:

The kind of essentialism that feminists usually worry about is the kind that claims that women’s bodies inevitably give rise to and justify specific cultural and psychological norms. [...]but this is biological determinism[...]. For Beauvoir, the possession of the usual biological and anatomical sexual characteristics is what makes a woman a woman. But given that she firmly demonstrates that this has no *necessary* social and political consequences, this is a kind of essentialism that has no negative consequences whatsoever for feminist politics. The only kind of essentialism that feminists need to reject is biological determinism. (Moi c2005: 36-37)

### **Unity in multiplicity: Feminist spirituality and ecofeminism**

One of the strongest arguments for positing woman as the inferior Other, the object removed far from the cultured world of men, has been that she is closely connected to nature. By virtue of her biology woman has been seen to present a counterpoint to man’s culture by being deeply connected to the natural world, which has been by many considered inferior to the transcendent world of the mind. Lynda Birke traces the subordination of both women and nature back to the concept of a “Great Chain of Being”, which was still valid in the eighteenth century:

According to this, creation was arranged such that God was at the top of the chain, below him were the angels and other heavenly beings, then European man, then woman, and then the various species of animals known at the time, followed by the plants and so on, in a linear hierarchy. (Birke 1986: 109)

Remnants of this idea have persisted, Birke believes, and have been responsible for the disdain of nature and a general belief in the right to exploit the natural world that has been evident in industrialised society.

This idea is also seen by Birke as responsible for the hierarchical feature of patriarchy which legitimises the demand for women’s submission: “Given that the Chain

was, by definition, hierarchical, this in effect creates a division into a higher and a lower part. In this way, men could be portrayed as nearer to God, while women were closer to brute creation (i.e. nature)” (Birke 1986: 109). Women were seen as being nearer to nature than to the heavenly world of God, and since nature was considered wild, uncontrollable and tainted by sin, women must also be affected by these aspects. In this way, nature was not only different from culture, but inferior as well as feared as something out of control.

In trying to escape women’s Otherness, a separate type of feminist spirituality has grown as an alternative to traditional Christian dogma, in which a hierarchical dualism:

opposes soul, spirit, rationality and transcendence to body, flesh, matter, nature and immanence. God is identified with the positive sides of the dualism, and “the world” with the negative sides. In this view, human beings stand between God and the world, spirit and nature, and must learn to subdue the irrational desires of the flesh. This is a model for domination, because reality is divided into two levels, one superior, one inferior. (Christ c1979: 5)

With this duality, women find it hard to be comfortable in their allotted place in the inferior section, alongside the troublesome flesh and the undisciplined natural world. By negating that the physical world is less valuable than the immaterial world of the spirit, adherent of feminist spirituality invalidate the debasement of both women and nature. Rather than separating entities hierarchically, “the overwhelming concern of the spiritual feminist enterprise is the search for and definition of a personal power which finds its basis in an ethic of interconnection rather than domination” (Crosby c2000: 4).

The anthology *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, attempted to address this problem by inviting women to expose patriarchal dualistic thinking, find new rituals that were meaningful for women, and to think of new ways to value women’s experiences. Feminist spirituality advocates a centring of women in the middle of the universe. This involves finding an alternative to a patriarchal God and advocates women’s bodies, experiences and relationships as important. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow urged women to *name themselves* and the world rather than allow a patriarchal interpretation of their experiences to shape women’s understanding of their place in this world:

It is through naming that humans progress from childhood to adulthood and learn to understand and shape the world about them. Under patriarchy, men have reserved to themselves the right to name, keeping women in a state of intellectual and spiritual dependency.[...]As women begin to name the world for themselves, they will upset the order that has been taken for granted throughout history. They will call themselves and the world into new being. (Christ c1979: 7)

By a new naming, the advocates of feminist spirituality believe women can change their perception of their own position and experiences, and use this new understanding to change dualistic, patriarchal definitions.

One model for women's experience is named by Christ and Plaskow "women's *traditional* experience, which includes, but is not limited to, women's body experience". This model advocates that "whatever sexist culture has rejected or denigrated must be revalued in a holistic feminist vision. Whatever is considered "feminine" – intuition, expression of feeling, concern for the personal dimensions of relationships – may be appropriated from a feminist perspective" (Christ c1979, p. 8). Central to valuing women's traditional experience is the women's connection with nature and their bodies, which Christ and Plaskow see as an opportunity that both men and women should grasp to orient themselves in the world. Although the editors see the danger in focusing on what has been negatively associated with women, such as nature, they believe that women's liberation from patriarchal practice cannot be adequately described as a "freedom from", but must include their connection to the earth, "expressing the total experience of women as both free and rooted in nature" (Christ c1979: 12).

Feminist critics such as Carol Christ believe that women have, through their ties to the body and the earth, a deeper connection to the world we live in than men do, and therefore have a greater responsibility to care for the natural world and our future. Christ sees the "feminine principle" of being the caretakers of humanity and the natural world as the only possible rescue for a world threatened by greed and pollution. This identification between women and nature by women themselves has been named *ecofeminism*. "Ecofeminism identifies the twin dominations of women and the rest of nature", writes Carol J. Adams, seeing ecofeminism as something that "argues that the connections between the oppression of women and the rest of nature must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions" (Adams 1993: 1). Adherents of ecofeminism understand that patriarchal domination is responsible for the enforced connection between women and nature:

Patriarchal conceptual frameworks that justify the domination of women also justify the domination of nonhuman nature by conceiving women and nature in terms which feminize nature, naturalize women, and position both women and nature as inferior to male-gender identified culture. (Warren: 1993: 123)

Ecofeminists do not seek for women to distance themselves from their enforced closeness to nature. Freeing women from being identified with nature would in a system

based on dualism only put them on the side of culture, creating fragmented beings severed from the world they live in. As this is what patriarchy is already accused of doing, ecofeminists do not want to transcend the natural world, but rather embrace it, and extend their own battle against domination on to the world they live in.

Feminist spirituality and ecofeminism are based on the premise that any kind of domination is wrong because it shows a deeper lack of respect for other living things. Lack of care for our environment is essentially a selfish want of consideration for others through valuing the individual's present comfort over the welfare of future generations. The liberation from domination in any form is seen as essential to creating an environment based on respect, and there can be no respect for people or understanding of their place in the world without also respecting the natural world they live in. Therefore, "ecofeminists seek a transformed consciousness that eliminates the dualisms that undergird dominance" (Adams 1993: 2). This is the quest for unity in multiplicity, in which many different parts make up an interconnected whole.

The quest for unity is most visible through the popular theme of goddess imagery, which is present in different forms in fantastic writing. The Goddess as a symbol of fertility is also a symbol of continuance, not through individual patriarchal family lines, but as a means of connecting people to the earth and envisioning existence beyond their own generation.

## **Hypothesis**

The starting point of this thesis is that women, in order to be governed by a patriarchal system, are placed in the role of the Other – the negative opposite of man in a hierarchical duality. Women have been regarded as being bound closer to the natural world than men by virtue of their biology. Whereas man's world is one of culture – a world of mind and control, woman is emblematised by nature. Nature is considered inferior, fallible and unpredictable unless controlled by superior culture which is the domain of men. This by extension creates an image of women as flawed, weak and incomplete creatures that need an outside male force to govern their existence in order for them to fulfil their role in a patriarchal society. Where men are subjects, women as the Other become passive objects, to be acted upon rather than acting on behalf of themselves.

The main structuring principle for dualistic, hierarchical patriarchy is *domination*, by those who believe themselves superior over what they consider inferior and in need of control, whether this is the natural world or other people.

To escape the doctrine of domination inherent in the patriarchal hierarchical duality which is responsible for the suppression of women, feminist fantasy stresses the ideal of *unity in multiplicity*, presenting fantastic societies centred on fellowship. The main principle for these societies is connection between its different entities rather than their separation, whether it concerns a union between men and women, or between different races; unity between people and the natural world; or a connection between the people's mental and physical existence that creates whole and contented individuals. Central here is fostering of what has traditionally been the caretaking function of women, and a grounding to the natural world that ensures a healthy community and sound interpersonal relationships. The hope is that a grounding to the earth and a trusting connection to other people will teach respect for the natural world and fellow human beings.

To do this, feminist fantasy works to redefine women by turning negative connotations of "woman" into positive ones, using a rewriting of language and symbolism. Because symbols and language are used to control people's perception of reality, feminist fantasy strives to present more valuable images of women and examples of how they can relate to the world and themselves. An important point in both *The Mists of Avalon* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* is how the power to name or define how the characters interpret reality is the power to govern how they relate to the world.

Two main aspects of this struggle to redefine women are present in most feminist fantasy. One is a focus on feminist spirituality to replace patriarchal imagery of women as weak and passive, seen especially through Goddess symbolism. This is both a way to present positive images of female power, and also to symbolise the desired unity of existence in most feminist utopias.

Another focus is that of finding and empowering the individual's place in the world, which can also be seen through the imagery of ecofeminism. Through themes of ecofeminism exploitation of nature is equated with patriarchal domination over women. By accepting the solidarity with nature which has been forced upon them, women symbolically free themselves as they liberate the natural world from exploitation. By using their supposed bond to nature to orient themselves and speak on behalf of a larger entity, women can draw strength from a previously negative association to the natural world.

However, this focus on women's connection to the natural world through their biology raises some difficult questions. Is it wise to tie women's self-image and perception of power so closely to the natural world? Will this create a more positive image of the feminine or merely perpetuate existing hierarchical dualities? There is a risk of locking

women into roles such as the “earth mother” which, albeit positive in intent, carry an inherent risk in limiting women to the instinctive and natural as opposed to the logical and civilised. Is “mothering” in this sense, i.e. having a deeper affinity with our natural environment leading to a greater concern for the common good, limited by biology, or is it something men are meant to share?

Another objection concerns the ideal of unity. Is there room for women as individuals when the dominant structuring principle of a society is amalgamation into a unified whole? Will individuals be respected for themselves, and not just for what they can contribute to a common cause?

One important consideration is if it is really better that women define themselves as a group rather than having men do so. The realities of women’s lives make them far from a homogenous group. Why then expect women to embody the same life experiences and understanding of the world merely because they share the same biological markings?

Any type of reasoning which sees an individual’s understanding of the world as something indelibly shaped by their biological sex lies dangerously close to biological determinism. Although there are attempts to replace former negative connotations of “woman” with positive abilities, they still ground and perpetuates duality between women and men on the basis of biology. The danger lies in letting biology take on the final authority and responsibility in making us what we are.

The crux in the quest for equality is that biology should not be a limiting factor in a person’s way of life. But can it be otherwise when biology is used to ground so many expectations of human identity? Can any type of definition of behaviour seen through glasses of biological essentialism liberate rather than restrict the individual’s perception of the world?

## **Organisation**

The first chapter will look at how the Mother’s world is described in *The Mists of Avalon*, with a focus on how images of the Goddess are used to ascribe women power through contact with the natural world. Feminist spirituality in the form of theologian Carol Christ meets feminist critic and advocate of androgyny Nina Björk in the section on nature as the divine, to see how the focus on women’s close association with the natural world stands in danger of ascribing nature authority over culture. This is followed by a chapter on how both women’s civic power and the people’s communion with nature is described as being

taken away with the oncoming dualistic split between human culture and nature associated in this novel with the advent of patriarchal Christianity. In the section on the power of naming, Bradley's focus on symbolism and belief will be examined, as the concept of reality is an important part of fantastic writing. Lastly, the fantasy quest will be analysed as a spiritual journey.

In the second chapter, *Woman on the Edge of Time* is introduced with a look at the effects on human beings of a society which has severed its connection with the natural world to the degree that it considers the world to be like a machine subject to human control. Then the power of naming is examined in which the Other is denied the ability to name its own reality through the control mechanism of the label of madness. This is followed by a look at how the mother's world in the future society of Mattapoisett is presented, and what beneficial effects unity with nature is shown to have on the people of that society. Finally, the degree to which the main protagonist's quest is completed is examined.

## *The Mists of Avalon*

*The Mists of Avalon* was first published in 1983 by Marion Zimmer Bradley, a prolific fantasy writer also known for her books situated on the feudal world of Darkover. The novel is an alternative version of the Arthurian legend as seen from the female characters' perspective, focusing on the tedium and restrictions of the women's lives rather than the great battles of the men. The plot of the novel is centred on the shift between the religious beliefs of the old-time Celtic Goddess worshippers and the new patriarchal Christianity.

Reinterpretations of the story of Arthur have become extremely popular as subject matter for fantasy writers, particularly female writers. Critics cite various causes for this popularity. Nickianne Moody believes the Arthurian theme appeals so strongly to female authors because they recognise the problem of using literary symbolism usually based on patriarchal, Christian ideology. This causes writers to search for pre-Christian systems of belief as a basis for literary narratives outside of patriarchy (Moody 1991: 193). Celtic culture is by many writers considered to exemplify a society in which women are given access to civic and religious power on an equal basis with men. Whether this was actually true historically, argues Adam Roberts, is not as important as how these societies are perceived in contemporary feminist ideology (Roberts 1998: 11). Crosby explains this further:

Emphasis on the historical presence of Goddess worship and indications that societies could have existed where women were not subordinate to men is revolutionary in that it questions the image of patriarchy as an eternal presence. It further allows women to envision themselves as capable of creating a society which affirms the power and divinity of women. (Crosby 2000: 14)

This idea that our perceptions of the world govern the reality we live in is a recurrent theme in *The Mists of Avalon*.

Bradley has been credited for her diligent use of historical and literary sources. This is common for female writers who take on rewritings of myths, according to Moody: "In challenging patriarchal notions of traditional folklore such as the legend of King Arthur, and general historical misconceptions of this period, women have either felt that they must justify themselves or, perhaps, that they must encourage further study and so have included fact with their fiction" (Moody 1991: 201). *The Mists of Avalon* is an example of what Raymond H. Thompson labels "heroic fantasy". Whereas "mythopoetic tellings" deal with



the struggle between good and evil on a level superseding human powers, heroic fantasy is more concerned with the exploration of the characters' psyche. As a result the readers gain greater insight into the characters' motivation, and their actions as normal human beings acquire a greater significance (Thompson 1985: 88). Feminist fantasy featuring magic tends to verge towards heroic fantasy in order to present a deeper understanding of the characters' choices and actions.

Heroic fantasy is designed to "test the extent to which the protagonists are prepared to follow the standards of conduct that they hold dear" (Thompson 1985: 114). In *The Mists of Avalon* the main struggle of the characters is how to resolve the dissolution of the Mother's world. The characters that go through this transitional time are tested in their resolve to do what is best for the country, as opposed to their own, personal ambition, in their struggle for the leadership of Britain.

### **Synopsis: The death of the Mother's world**

The main plot of *The Mists of Avalon* centres on the change brought on by the Romans and their offspring in Britain. This is a time when the Celts with their Druids and Goddess worship are struggling with the new people and the new ideas of a newly Christian Britain. In addition to religious unrest, Britain is threatened from the outside by attacks from the Saxons. Desperate to save Britain, the head representatives of the Goddess religion, Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, and Taliesin, the Merlin, plot to produce a great leader of the nation capable of uniting the different peoples of Britain in the common struggle against the intruders. The island of Avalon, the heart of the Goddess worshippers, has been magically superimposed on to the Christian island of Glastonbury to protect it from Christianity crowding in. Priestesses of the Goddess are among the few capable of raising the mists between the worlds and thereby gain access to Avalon. Viviane, the Lady of the Lake at the beginning of the novel, orchestrates the marriage of her young priestess sister Igraine of Avalon to Gorlois, the wealthy Christian Duke of Cornwall, in order to produce an heir that will fuse the followers of the old and the new religions together. Their marriage produces, however, not a son to unite Britain, but rather a daughter, Morgaine, who becomes the central character of the novel. At the behest of The Lady of the Lake and the Merlin, Igraine turns to another man to produce a future ruler for Britain, the War Duke Uther Pendragon, whom she eventually marries at the death of Gorlois. Their son, Arthur,

is set to become the king who will be able to unite all the peoples of Britain against the intruders.

Years later, to test the young Arthur's commitment to the land, Viviane and Taliesin put him through the ritual of the King Stag, in which he demonstrates his leadership capabilities and commitment to the land by killing the head of the sacred herd of deer of Avalon - the King Stag. To secure the old ways through the bloodline of Avalon, Viviane chooses Morgaine to act the part of the first aspect of the Goddess - the Virgin Huntress - to her own brother in this ceremony. With Morgaine secluded for many years in Avalon to become a priestess, brother and sister do not recognise each other until after the ceremony. Through this union, Morgaine has a son called Gwydion, who is brought up by her sister Morgause. After completing the ritual, Arthur is given the sword of the Sacred Regalia of the Druids, in exchange for a pledge to protect all the people of Britain. Arthur, married to Gwenhwyfar and crowned as king of Britain, sets up his court and his band of companion knights at Camelot, but the marriage is wrought with conflict. Gwenhwyfar is attracted to Arthur's knight Lancelot, one of Viviane's sons, and believes her continued childlessness to be a punishment from God for failing to make Arthur embrace Christianity on behalf of the whole nation. To console his wife, Arthur lays down the uniting dragon banner of Uther Pendragon, taking up in its place a Christian banner displaying the Virgin Mary.

Morgaine plans to dethrone Arthur for his betrayal of the old beliefs, but is discovered, and in a fight with Arthur her lover Acolion is killed. She leaves Camelot to kill her brother, but in the final moment instead throws into the lake at Avalon the magical scabbard given to Arthur for his protection at his kingship ceremony, heralding the end of the Goddess' protection of Arthur. Years pass while the island of Avalon retreats further into the mists by the onslaught of Christianity. In a final attempt to create unity in Britain, the new Merlin Kevin brings the holy regalia of the Druids to the Christian court to be used in a mass service at Pentecost. Morgaine, however, sees the use of Druid regalia in a Christian service as a betrayal of the old ways, and as an embodiment of the Goddess she casts the cup of wine into time, creating the myth of the Holy Grail. Kevin tries to be a bridge between the old Goddess faith and the new Christian beliefs, but is killed as a traitor at Avalon. Although it is clear that Morgaine should have been the Lady of the Lake after Viviane, her avoidance of Avalon after the ritual with Arthur leaves the Goddess' followers without a strong leadership, echoing the confusion in the rest of Britain. There is unrest in the land - Northmen invade the shores and Saxon armies gather again. In an

attempt to catch Gwenhwyfar and Lancelet as lovers, Morgaine's favourite stepson Gareth is killed, and Lancelet and Gwenhwyfar escape. The High Queen shuts herself in a convent to allow Lancelet and Arthur to band together to fight the encroaching power of Morgaine and Arthur's son Gwydion. In a final challenge, Gwydion is killed, and Arthur receives a wound which later kills him. The Saxons have invaded the sacred areas of Dragon Island and killed the deer used in the kingship ceremony. Avalon is moving too far apart in terms of space and time from the real world to have any impact on Britain, and has been replaced by Christianity. The reign of King Arthur has ended.

### **The Mother's world – embodying the Goddess**

*The Mists of Avalon* describes a people living in the Mother's world in the form of the Goddess and her servants on the island of Avalon. She is responsible for the life and welfare of Britain, and her priestesses interpret her will and lead the people in rituals to bind them to the earth and their Goddess. The Goddess is seen as "the original principle of immanent divinity which affirms the natural processes of life, death, change, as well as the inherent worth of each person" (Crosby 2000: 22). Modern-day adherents of feminist spirituality use goddess imagery to combat patriarchal domination, aiming to exchange the patriarchal ideal of hierarchical duality and separation for a vision of unity between body and mind, and humankind and the natural world. Goddess worship is "focused on nature and fecundity, with a close connection between human and vegetal fertility" (Spivack 1987: 157). Some modern feminists use the image of a female deity to celebrate women's bodies and validate female power (Christ 1986: 128). For them, the Goddess is seen as an expression of women's power through their connection to the natural world, turning the patriarchal world's previously negative associations to women's bodies and nature into something positive.

Goddess imagery is often viewed as a celebration of characteristics generally ascribed to women, such as nurturing. Although some see the Goddess as representing a humanistic belief system most commonly accredited to women through their assigned role as nurturers, others connect to the Goddess through women's bodily experiences. Many critics concerned with feminist spirituality, such as Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, see women as having a closer relationship with nature than men:

Women's traditional roles have allowed them to maintain contact with nature and natural processes, while society as a whole has moved toward increasing alienation from nature. The sense of closeness to nature that some women experience in nature mysticism or in the cycles of their bodies, in menstruation, pregnancy, and birth have much to teach all women and men about the rootedness of the human condition in the natural order. (Christ c1979: 11-12)

Nature here is viewed as a source of strength to root humankind rather than something that must be fought. Some believe that by hallowing women's bodies and their supposedly special connection to nature they can overcome the hierarchical aspect of patriarchal duality which has considered both women and nature inferior. By renaming and revaluing what are seen as women's special experiences they hope that the hierarchy between man-woman, and culture-nature will be equalised:

Learning to value everything about being a woman is a key theme in women's new naming. Women name the beauty and strength of women's bodies and of their own particular bodies. They learn to value the life-giving potential of their monthly bleeding and celebrate their bodies' connections to nature. Women learn to overcome the "false" naming and devaluing of traditional women's activities like mothering and nurturing. They begin to name women's activities as sources of insight, to name women's valuing of nurturance as a power of life which women may use to transform culture[...]. Thus,, far from being trivial, the new celebrations of women's bodies, powers, solitude, and connections to each other is the beginning of the end of centuries-old patterns of self-hatred and self-negation. (Christ 1986: 24)

*The Mists of Avalon* presents a society in which women have great power as representatives of a divine force. This power lies in mothering in an extended sense. Women are the main caretakers of the Mother's world, and are entrusted with the responsibility for the welfare of the community in harmony with the natural world. For those who serve the Goddess life and death are both necessary elements to the other and contribute to the unity of existence. The followers of the Goddess see themselves as part of the natural cycle of life and death, "even when the time comes for barrenness and death, so that others may come to take our place on this earth, that is her doing too, she who is [...] even Our Lady of rot and destruction and death at the end" (p. 460). Themes of cyclical change and rebirth that confirm human belonging in a greater cycle of life are extremely important, as we see from the often repeated phrase "The young stag must kill the King Stag". The ritual of the Horned One, in which a future king demonstrates his suitability as leader of the land, involves killing the leader of the sacred herd of deer in Avalon in what is more than a *symbol* of succession. By ousting the current leader, the would-be king

proves that he is the strongest leader to protect the flock. The ritual is a confirmation of the king's tie to the land and his dedication to preserve the flock, and thereby Britain, by being willing to risk his own life for the good of the community.

As representatives of the Goddess and her life force, women are awarded a certain power over the corporeal world. In a culture where reincarnation is a vital part of the belief system, death serves a purpose of continuation, and "mother goddesses are symbols of transformation, whatever shape they may take. Rebirth is the key theme of religious life, and mother deities are profound reminders to us all of the primacy of the mother/infant bond – a source both of stability and change" (Preston in Shinn 1986: 28). The ability to give birth entails taking responsibility for the living up to and encompassing death, and it is the task of the priestesses to keep the cycle of life running. "The cult of germination has always been associated with the cult of the dead" writes Simone de Beauvoir, "The Earth Mother engulfs the bones of her children.[...] In most popular representations Death is a woman, and it is for women to bewail the dead because death is their work" (Beauvoir 1997: 179). When women are seen as caretakers of the living, they are to some extent granted authority over death. However, with the advent of Christianity women are denied this power. Therefore, when Viviane, as an embodiment of the Death-crone aspect of the Goddess performs euthanasia on an old friend she is killed as a sorceress by her friend's son. This is a sign that times are changing. The human bond to the land with its acceptance of cyclical renewal through birth and death is broken. Women are now considered hampered by, rather than strengthened by their access to the life forces.

Perhaps the greatest failing of Viviane, the old Lady of the Lake, is that she does not accept the death of Avalon in the "real" world of Britain. The new Merlin Kevin sees even the lack of support for the Goddess as an aspect of natural transformation and rebirth:

"If Avalon dies," said Niniane, "then Britain is without her heart and will die, for the Goddess has withdrawn her soul from all the land."

"Think you so, Niniane?" Kevin sighed again, and said, "I have been all up and down these lands, in all weathers and all times – Merlin of Britain, hawk of the Sight, messenger of the Great Raven – and I see another heart in the land, and it shines forth from Camelot."(p. 687)

It is for the Christians, with their belief in transcendence, to fear death as the end of existence. Adherents of the Goddess are required to accept death and change as a natural part of life, as the earth mother's "constant is change" (Crosby 2000: 45).

## **Becoming the Other: From unity to hierarchical duality**

*The Mists of Avalon* is essentially about the Mother's world and how it is exchanged for the dualistic and hierarchical patriarchal world. Under the Goddess the people listen and allow themselves to be governed by the forces of nature, while the new Christians attempt to dominate and rule the life force of the body and the natural world worshipped under the old ways. "The Mothers provided a world in tune with nature, accepting the ambiguities of life, maintaining a community of all living things" writes Thelma J. Shinn, and quotes from another Arthurian novel, Walton's *Mabinogion*: "It is only in man that consciousness burns" (Shinn 1986: 30).

Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow trace Ruether's theory on historical religious change being responsible for women's subordination under patriarchy. Ruether asserted

that sexism is rooted in the dualistic world view that grew out of the dramatic religious changes that swept classical civilization in the first millennium B.C.E. The breakdown of tribal culture in that period led to the disruption of the holistic perspective that characterized early human societies. Woman and man, nature and culture, body and spirit, Goddess and God, once bound together in a total vision of world renewal, became split off from each other and ordered hierarchically. When male culture-creating groups appropriated the positive side of each of these dualisms for themselves, the age-old male-female polarity was given a newly oppressive significance. Women were identified with nature, body, the material realm, all of which were considered distinctly inferior to transcendent male spirit. (Christ c1979: 21)

The transition from the Mother's world to the realm of patriarchal Christianity in Britain involves a major shift in existential thought and in the perception of humankind's position in the world. The belief in the unity of all living is replaced by a strict duality in which the split between the earthly and the heavenly world is shown to separate the mind and the body in a hierarchy, leaving the body and the physical world to be dominated and conquered by the human culture that emphasises transcendence:

While the ancient Gods, the Goddess, were seen as benevolent or life-giving, so indeed had nature been to them; and when the priests had taught men to think of all nature as evil, alien, hostile, and the old Gods as demons, even so they would become, surging up from within that part of man which he now wished to sacrifice or control, instead of letting it lead him. (p. 932)

What has previously been regarded as holy is now seen as evil and corrupting to human society. With strict dualism between mind and body, and heaven and earth, the association between women and nature becomes threatening. A woman's ties to the earth through

childbearing are seen as demonstrations of her fallibility and vice. This is the hierarchical aspect of the duality, which leaves no room for two equal forces sharing the same place in the people's beliefs:

"The two are *one*," said the Merlin, sitting very erect, "but the followers of Christ have chosen to say, not that *they* shall have no other Gods before their God, but that there *is* no other God save for their God; that he alone made the world, that he rules it alone, that he alone made the stars and the whole of creation." Igraine quickly made the holy sign against blasphemy. "But that cannot be," she insisted. "No single God can rule all things...and what of the Goddess? What of the Mother...?" "They believe," said Viviane, in her smooth low voice, "that there is no Goddess; for the principle of woman, so they say, is the principle of all evil; through woman, so they say, Evil entered this world." (p. 12-13)

Bradley lets the new Christians of Britain represent a very harsh patriarchal domination over women. Through the story of Exodus, woman is seen to represent sin incarnate. In the new Christian dichotomy, women are associated with the base desires of earthly imperfections, as something preventing men from rising to heavenly glory. The only way for the Other to atone the crime of existence lies in remaining passive, repressing its own will to try to atone for its foremother's wickedness. Gwenhwyfar despairs:

Women had to be especially careful to do the will of God because it was through a woman that mankind had fallen into Original Sin, and every woman must be aware that it was her work to atone for the Original Sin in Eden. No woman could ever really be good except for Mary the Mother of Christ; all other women were evil, they had never had any chance to be anything but evil. (p. 309)

Woman, associated through her body with inferior nature, is inherently evil from birth. Her fault in being born in a female body binds her closer to the earth, and reinforces her fallibility, whereas man is left free to define himself as a disembodied, glorious creature. Under this dogmatic patriarchy, women can never win and never retrieve their status as autonomous creatures, but will stay forever bound to the curse of pious expiation.

Under these circumstances, the female characters of *The Mists of Avalon* are seen to gradually lose what autonomy they have. Magic therefore plays an important part in empowering the servants of the Goddess. Because the rest of society resists female power, the priestesses must increasingly turn to magical glamour to affect the people around them. Magic has often been regarded as women's realm, as a means to connect to, and harness nature's energy. "At base it seems to rely on an (unspoken) belief that science and technology is somehow tarred with the 'masculine' brush, and that pre-scientific

equivalents, magic and telepathy, are somehow more ‘female’” (Roberts 1998: 57). Nickianne Moody proposes that magic is used within the setting of Arthurian legend as a substitute for technology (Moody 1991: 200). In Arthurian stories the use of magic often signifies women’s power over their surroundings. Similarly, the weakening of magic heralds the loss of this power (Shinn 1986: 24). Often the line between real magic and illusion is a thin one, as in Avalon, and highly dependent upon people’s beliefs. When faced with Morgaine’s priestess-taught glamour Lancelet comments that she looks like his mother – “All tall and distant and remote and – and not quite real. Like a female demon” (p. 184). To the young Lancelet, the priestesses’ power is demonic because it is earth-based and therefore to a burgeoning Christian is seen as corrupted.

Many see early Christianity’s emphasis on transcendence as disruptive for the unity of human society. The aim has gone from communal continuance on earth to individual transcendence into a heavenly existence:

The old religions of the earth became private cults for the individual, no longer anticipating the renewal of the earth and society but rather expecting an otherworldly salvation of the individual soul after death. Nature itself came to be seen as an alien reality, and men now visualized their own bodies as foreign to their true selves, longing for a heavenly home to release them from their enslavement within the physical cosmos. Finally, earth ceased to be seen as man’s true home. (Christ c1979: 47)

Thus the separation between people and the natural world is seen also to individualise existence on earth. The previous focus on unifying with others to ensure the strength of the group has shifted to individual salvation. This shift in beliefs and the changing roles for women is most clearly visible in the characterisation of Morgaine and Arthur’s wife, Gwenhwyfar. Morgaine represents Goddess worship with its ancient bond between the land and its people, whereas Bradley has made Gwenhwyfar into a symbol of patriarchal, Christian suppression. In between these two is Lancelet, noble companion to Arthur and the son of the Lady of the Lake. In this story he functions as a go-between for the transitional stage between the two systems of belief. Lancelet is emblematic of the quest initiated by Arthur’s Companions to achieve heavenly glory, as they strive for the sublime which is not of this world. Lancelet’s initial fascination with, and ultimate rejection of Morgaine is a clear indication of his rejection of the Mother’s world, which he comes to see as tainted with sorcery. When given a choice, he easily transfers his affection from Morgaine, “little and ugly like one of the fairy folk. Morgaine of the Fairies”, to the tamed



beauty of Gwenhwyfar: “this exquisite golden creature belonged to his own world” (p. 182). Whereas Morgaine embodies power through her mystical union with the land, Gwenhwyfar belongs to a world that searches for heavenly glory rather than the flawed beauties of earth. Man’s quest for transcendence of the physical world is, however, presented as corrupting his life on earth into misery. Because he seeks to own what he can never have, he is destined to fail. Gwenhwyfar comments on Lancelet’s quest for the Grail: “There was something rapt, otherworldly, shining in his face. So it had come to him, too, that great joy? But why, then, did he need to go forth to seek it? Surely it was within him as well?” (p. 896). Unlike Gwenhwyfar who has found the Goddess within herself, Lancelet has denied earthly existence as a source of spiritual fulfilment or enlightenment. In the quest for the ultimate emblem of heavenly glory, the Grail, Galahad is the only one to actually find it, but typically, he is killed when touching it. The perfection that the men seek is by definition non-corporeal, and does not belong on this earth.

### **Nature as the divine**

In the new world of patriarchal Christianity the devaluation of the physical world and the focus on transcendence is seen as responsible for severely alienating people from the powers of the Goddess and the natural world. The women in *Avalon* who deny the Goddess are cut off from drawing strength from the earth. The most obvious character that displays this alienation is Gwenhwyfar, who is kept in perpetual childhood by an overprotective father who denies her the strength and autonomy of a grown woman. Characteristically, therefore, Gwenhwyfar is disconnected from the earth to the point of being agoraphobic, indicating her initial alienation from the Mother’s world of power, as “it was the weight of all that sky and the wide lands which frightened her” (p. 290). Growing up in to believe herself inferior for being a woman, Gwenhwyfar sees women having power as something unnatural, and she prefers the restrictions of her father’s man-made enclosed garden to the untamed Mother’s world beyond.

The physical world, from having been considered a hallowed source of power, is by Bradley shown to be transformed into a sin-ridden precursor to the soul’s heavenly existence, in a “world which is unchanging and infinite and therefore superior to this world of finitude and change” (Christ 1986: xiii). This is contrasted with the belief of the Goddess worshippers that human beings are a part of the larger forces of creation and the natural world, to the extent that humans should accept to be governed by nature:

The difference is deeper than I thought. Even those who till the earth, when they are Christians, come to a way of life which is far from the earth; they say that their God has given them dominion over all growing things and every beast of the field. Whereas we dwellers in hillside and swamp, forest and far field, we know that it is not we who have the dominion over nature, but she who has dominion over us. (p. 459)

Nature here becomes an embodiment of the Goddess' power over the life forces of creation. Humans should therefore obey these life forces of the natural world to celebrate the Goddess. The symbolism of this worshipping of nature carries its own risks. The danger in this type of thinking is that nature can be seen as the ultimate authority for human behaviour. This is to perpetuate the dualism between nature and culture, in a type of role-reversal - the "naturally given" is sacred and should not be changed by culture (Björk 1999: 41). Revaluing women's supposedly special characteristics involves seeing biological duality as a guide to human culture. Carol Christ speaks up for abolishing the hierarchical aspect of patriarchal duality, but reinforces the concept of duality in itself: "If women are different from but not inferior to men, then perhaps nature is different from but not inferior to spirit. [...] A revaluing of the so-called negative sides of the classic dualisms and a transformation of the hierarchical mentality is implicit in women's quest" (Christ 1986: 25-26). Even if Carol Christ urges an understanding of women's "traditional experiences" such as nurturing to be combined with women's "feminist experience" of liberation, it is still difficult to see her implications of a continued dualism between the sexes as anything other than a "separate but equal" doctrine. "While proponents of gynocentric essentialism invert the ontological premises of androcentric essentialism, they too accept the dualism, the "either-or" mentality, of such physiological premises. They implicitly work within a comparably circumscribed and therefore distortingly symbolic model of reality" (Rosinsky 1984: 106). As role-reversal in fantastic fiction is criticised for not examining the roles themselves, so this revaluing of feminine elements does little to challenge the *necessity* for gender roles.

One of the most commonly debated examples of women's "traditional experiences" is motherhood. *The Mists of Avalon* is very much about mothering, both in a symbolic sense when the priestesses are shown to embody the Mother Goddess, and in a practical sense in the women's experiences of being mothers themselves. The female characters are centred on mothering as a means to influence others and relate to the world around them. To demonstrate the power of mothering, Bradley uses imagery of spinning to indicate

women's value as caretakers in the common weave of existence. Morgaine can use the Sight, a clairvoyant ability connected to the Goddess, most easily when she spins, indicating that she draws power from her connection to the Goddess' ability to control human existence: "As she spun out the thread, so she spun the lives of men – was it any wonder that one of the visions of the Goddess was a woman spinning...from the time a man comes into the world we spin his baby clothes, will we at last spin his shroud. Without us, the lives of men would be naked indeed" (p. 851). When a mother acts from selfish motives, however, she fails to spin true. Morgaine, in what possibly indicates her strong connection to the Goddess and her suitability to become the new Lady of the Lake, has always been an excellent spinner. However, after her misplaced ambition and failed attempt to oust Arthur has led to her lover's death, she dreams of Viviane, the old Lady of the Lake, teaching her how to spin according to the Mother's rule:

"Viviane was speaking to her, telling her something she could not quite remember, something of how the Goddess spun the lives of men, and she handed Morgaine a spindle and bade her spin, but the thread would not come smooth, but tangled and knotted and at last Viviane, angry with her, said, 'Here, give it to me...' and she handed over the broken threads and the spindle, only it was not Viviane, either, but the face of the Goddess, threatening, and she was very small, very small...spinning and spinning with fingers too small to hold the distaff, and the Goddess bore the face of Igraine (p. 854).

In Morgaine's dream the trinity of the Goddess is exemplified by the three women: Morgaine as the Maiden, Igraine as the Mother, and Viviane as the Crone, or wise-woman. Ultimately, the servants of the Goddess are given licence to influence others because they act on behalf of greatest Mother of all - the Mother Goddess.

If a particular group of people is seen as somehow closer to nature, then it is easier to be categorised in terms of biology. If it is claimed that, for example, it is in women's nature to be passive, or to behave maternally, then what is usually meant is that their "nature" is an essential, unchangeable, part of women. The implication is that this unchangeable nature is a product of a uniquely female biology. (Birke 1986: 9)

In the end, the Goddess is a symbol of the power of creation that lies in motherhood, but Bradley does little to advance images of the priestesses as natural born mothers. Although the three priestesses who serve as narrators in the story all at times embody some aspect of the Goddess, none of these women function well as actual mothers themselves. Igraine is more preoccupied with her husband than her children, Viviane uses Morgaine as a

daughter in spirit for her own ends, and Morgaine shows little concern for her son Gwydion after his birth. All three women are thus seen as failing in coming to terms with the more practical aspects of being a mother. This saves the novel from becoming entirely a homily to motherhood, as Bradley presents mothering as a symbol of the desired unity of existence that should replace hierarchical duality. Seeing oneself as a mother is a way of relating to one's surroundings, as a caretaker rather than a dictator.

However, in *The Mists of Avalon*, the belief that nature should be the ultimate guide to human society is proposed as a better way of relating to the nature/culture dichotomy than the domination of culture over nature. Dominating nature, as the Christians are seen to do, is arrogant and harmful to human existence. Obeying what are seen as nature's laws and the greater powers of the universal life force is viewed as submitting to what is "natural". The implication is that whatever is considered natural is good. The danger of this type of reasoning is that nature can be seen as the ultimate authority for human behaviour. The revaluation of women's supposedly natural nurturing characteristics stands in danger of continuing the dualism between nature and culture, and thereby threatens to alienate women from culture. Bradley presents the new, human culture of domination that arrives with the Christians as being so corrupted that it needs to be rescued by "nature" in the form of a feminine principle of mothering. This both perpetuates the image of "culture" as a male endeavour, and assigns women universally the responsibility of being caretakers of the world. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow see women as saviours of human society in an ecological future because they supposedly respect and listen more closely to the power of life through their bodies, and this is the life force celebrated through images of the Goddess in *The Mists of Avalon*. Women's power is seen to come from embodying the Goddess and celebrating the divinity of their own biology: "Above all, *The Mists of Avalon* addresses the woman reader as the goddess incarnate" (Spivack 1987: 161). Adherents of feminist spirituality and ecofeminism tend to see women's qualities as life-affirming values that should confront the exploitation and separation of dominating patriarchy. Women are seen as the hope for a culture that abuses the natural world, as "one key to the construction of a new holistic and world-affirming ethic may be the uplifting and reevaluation of those qualities dispised [sic] in women" (Christ c1979: 22). This is bordering on gynocentric essentialism, of seeing women's supposedly special characteristics as something that can save a world corrupted by patriarchal values.

Opposing the idea that women inherently embody humanistic values that can combat and shape patriarchal culture are critics who see this line of thought as more

limiting than liberating for the individual. These critics see the idea of an archetypal “Woman”, an entity embodying an eternal feminine essence, as an alluring, but ultimately unproductive line of thought:

Feminism believes in woman, she is its dearest fetisch. Feminism wants to “liberate” woman, wants to “represent” her, wants to “value her experiences”. Feminism loves woman. It is a love that has changed her into a utopia, into a dream about another world, a better world order.[Woman] becomes a way out; if *she* could decide there would be fewer wars, less pollution, and racism would be more rare. The woman of feminism often becomes a dream about goodness [...]. In the New Age movement she becomes the mysterious natural force needed by our technological and rational world. (Björk 1999: 12. My translation)

In *The Mists of Avalon*, the ultimate expression of women’s “mysterious natural force” is the Goddess, and the power that comes from her link to the natural world. It is implied that a society governed according to a “feminine” principle of nurturing in unity with nature, will create a society that respects the rights of both men and women to exercise civic influence. In contrast, when we remove ourselves from the natural world the “principle of woman” becomes evil, leading to a repression of female power.

Women’s status as the objectified Other means not only that men see them as objects, but that they come to see *themselves* as objects. “When a woman thinks of *herself* she thinks of her *body*”, says Björk, because “to be objectified means not just that when a man sees me as a woman he sees me as an object, but also that I see myself as an object, that my body both is me and my object” (Björk 1999: 32. My translation). In *The Mists of Avalon* it is only when the female characters stop trying to affect change that they manage to commune perfectly with their Goddess. Crosby sees Morgaine’s fusion with the Goddess as the ultimate conclusion to her spiritual quest:

Because this action is not an attempt to manipulate others, but is in fact the Goddess’ own statement of her presence, the carrying of the Chalice marks a pinnacle of Morgaine’s attunement with the source of her own power. By being, rather than doing, Morgaine becomes one with life, and thus one with the Goddess. With this knowledge comes balance; she can act from a position of strength, yet it is a position which acknowledges interconnection. (Crosby 2000: 52)

When unity replaces hierarchical duality the individual is strengthened both in relation to self and cosmos, but this unity can only come when the individual is subsumed into the greater forces of life.

The people relate to the Goddess and the powers of life she represents by celebrating the life force as nature's mastery over human society. They commune with their deity through bodily rituals, especially fertility rituals. Although for the servants of the Goddess reproduction is not directly connected to marriage, they participate in sexual acts as in all other things as representatives of the Goddess. The women's bodies become vessels for the greater life forces celebrated as a religion. At times there is a feeling of ruthlessness, and even violence, in the description of the rituals and celebrations of the greater life force. The fertility rite of Beltane includes girls who are far too young, in what seems more like rape than a celebration, and Viviane is obligated to partake in the ceremony of the Great Marriage which ties a king to the land, threatening her life as it results in a pregnancy she is too old to endure. For the priestesses sexuality often becomes yet another aspect of their servitude. Morgaine comments from time to time on the Christians' contempt for the body and indicates that she wishes they would be forced to submit to the celebrations that recognise the Goddess' power, "as the priestesses were taught to think about it: a great force of nature, clean and sinless, to be welcomed as a current of life, sweeping the participants into the torrent" (p. 619). The body is here seen as the vehicle through which humans should submit to the life forces that uphold the world, in order to tie them to the land.

In a society that worships the greater life force the individual is seen as less important than the group as a whole. The focus is on survival with a long-term view in mind for the greater society of Britain. Consequently, the individual is considered important solely as a means to preserve the land and the welfare of the flock. The priestesses of the Goddess are constantly called upon to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of others. The Lady of the Lake warns the young Morgaine when she becomes a priestess that "it is no easy thing to serve the will of Ceridwen, my daughter, she is not only the Great Mother of Love and Birth, she is also the Lady of Darkness and Death. [...] I must use you for her purposes as I was myself used" (p. 156-157). The personal happiness of Viviane, Igraine, Morgaine, and others is given up to serve the Goddess, forcing them to act in ways that alienate those they care for. Whether the women are priestesses of Avalon or Christians, their lives are sacrificed to serve the greater good. Both Igraine and Gwenhwyfar are married off unwillingly at a young age to suit those who plan for the future of Britain. Igraine's unhappy first marriage and motherhood among strangers is commanded by Viviane to serve Avalon and Britain. Her two children, Morgaine and Arthur, are the result of long-time planning by the Lady of the Lake and the

Merlin. With the long-term welfare of the group in mind, the wishes of the individual are sacrificed. In this lies the major fault with the portrayal of a society in which women are given licence to act on their own behalf. “For our part, we hold that the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens”, declares Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir 1997: 28). The private good of the citizens of Britain cannot be said to be a priority, no matter what their religious affiliations are. Although the priestesses of the Goddess have more power to wield and more freedom to act as autonomous beings than the Christian women, they are still expected to put the interests of other people before individual happiness. The only difference between the fates of Igraine and Gwenhwyfar is that the priestesses are given a choice whether or not to commit themselves fully into the service of the Goddess, whereas women under patriarchal Christianity are not asked if they wish to give up their autonomy. The followers of the Goddess accept that to become priestesses they must allow themselves to be given in sacrifice for the greater good. Bradley stresses that if self-sacrifice is needed, it should at least be the result of a conscious decision on the women’s part.

### **The power of naming: Symbolism and belief**

*“For this is the great secret, which was known to all educated men in our day: that by what men think, we create the world around us, daily new”* (p. ix). So Morgaine commences her story and sets the scene for one of the main themes of *The Mists of Avalon* – the power of naming. One of the key issues of Bradley’s work is the importance of symbols, and how our interpretations of these symbols govern our view of reality. This is continually emphasised, especially by the Merlin Taliesin who has reached the wisdom the other characters strive for. He recognises that “it is the beliefs of mankind which shapes the world, and all of reality.” (p 13). The power of belief in *The Mists of Avalon* has a very real and direct influence on the characters’ lives. On the island where Avalon is situated there are as many as three dimensions existing at one time in the same physical location. Avalon, the Christian isle of Glastonbury and the fairies’ world are all located on or around the same island. Where the traveller ends up depends upon what he or she believes in. Only those who believe strongly enough that Avalon exists and that they are worthy to enter are able to find their way through the mists that hide it. Thus Morgaine, when returning from her self-imposed exile after the ritual of the King Stag, is unable to enter Avalon because

of her own doubts and fears that she by forfeiting her position as priestess no longer is worthy to enter the Holy Isle.

The initial plight of the Goddess worshippers is that the belief of the new Christians, with their intolerant insistence on only one truth, is shaping a world in which there is no more room for the Goddess:

But whatever it is that they believe, the views they hold are altering this world; not only in the spirit, but on the material plane. As they deny the world of the spirit, and the realms of Avalon, so those realms cease to exist for them. They still exist, of course; but not in the same world with the world of the followers of Christ. (p. 14)

It is the Christians' intolerant desire to see their god as an exclusive divine power that drives away the Goddess worship of old. The Isle of the Priests and the Holy Isle of Avalon drift apart because there is no room for other beliefs in Christian Britain than that of a patriarchal God.

Those who name and shape the symbols that govern the people's lives have power over the people. In a society governed by the patriarchal quest for a stable, non-corporeal world of perfection, the symbols of woman and the natural world pose a threat. The new Christians realise that in banishing the symbol of the Goddess they can shape a new reality in the minds of the people, as the Mother's world will cease to exist in the real world when people stop believing in it. When the devout Christian Gwenhwyfar persuades Arthur to exchange the old dragon banner of his father with a banner of the Virgin Mary this exchange of symbols heralds a transfer to Christianity: "Those of Avalon – Druid, priest and priestess – would know that the banner is but a symbol, and the symbol is nothing, while the reality is all. But the little folk, no, they would not understand, and they must have their dragon as a symbol of the King's protection", says the Merlin Taliesin (p.445). Although symbols are important, the Merlin indicates that for those who have grown enough in wisdom to trust the reality beneath, the exact appearance of the symbols themselves matter little: "God is one and there is but one God – all else is but the way the ignorant seek to put Gods into a form they can understand [...]. Dragon and Virgin alike are the signs of man's appeal to what is higher than we" (p. 444). However, it takes time, effort and trust in something higher for the characters to come to this understanding, and one of the main themes of *The Mists of Avalon* is the learning process that involves finding the reality behind the illusion (Thompson 1985: 135-6).



Even with Bradley's emphasis that symbols merely denote many truths underneath, Crosby argues that we inevitably do shape the world by our representation of it:

in Bradley's fictive world the loss of the Goddess is much more than the loss of a symbol. It also signals the loss of entire cultural supports for female autonomy and power. In the Goddess-focused tradition of the British Tribes, women are seen as the Goddess' representatives. Whether or not they are her priestesses, all women relate to her aspects as Maiden, Mother and Crone at various points in their lives. In Christianity, however, all women are symbolically linked with Eve (Crosby 2000: 44).

When women are seen as aspects of the Goddess, there is larger room for displays of female power than if they are associated with an inherently corrupted and flawed creature. Symbols, in shaping our view of what is possible and what can or cannot exist in our own world does carry meaning that shapes everyday life, although for the people of Avalon it is indicated that the Goddess can never truly die. Symbols of patriarchy that effect to displace the Goddess can be reinterpreted. Even though surface structures change with the coming of a Christian world view, the Goddess is still present, though she must now be seen through the new symbols of Christianity. These new symbols of deity can be invested with other meaning than the patriarchal, dualistic reality they are originally meant to denote. The Virgin Mary, Martha and the saint Brigid are all held up as images that can be worshipped as "licensed" versions of the Goddess under patriarchy.

The writing of *The Mists of Avalon* is in itself a usurpation of naming. Most of the classic retellings of the myth of Arthur present Morgaine as an evil sorceress. In this version Morgaine herself functions as narrator and Bradley presents her as an essentially sympathetic human being, surrounded by other strong, female characters. Enabling Morgaine to tell her story from her own perspective allows us to see the complexity of her tale, rather than perceiving her as a one-dimensional symbol of evil: "Here she is both fate and the fated (Morgana Fata), both the fairy enchantress (Morgan le Fay) and the embattled human, subject to pressures from within her own nature and from the world without" (Spivack 1987: 153). Morgaine herself opens the book with a prologue, making it very clear that as she has come to see that there is no eternal truth, it is important that her story is heard from her own perspective. Others may represent her differently: "*But this is my truth; I who am Morgaine tell you these things, Morgaine who was in later days called Morgan le Fay*" (p. xi).

This is one of the reasons fantasy has become a popular vehicle for feminist statements. Feminist fantasy “scrutinizes the categories of the patriarchal real, revealing them to be arbitrary, shifting constructs: the subjugation of women is not a ‘natural’ characteristic, but an ideological process” (Cranny-Francis 1990: 77). Morgaine’s truth is that the people of Britain live in the Mother’s world, in which the priestesses act as representatives of the Mother Goddess in caring for Britain in all the Goddess’ aspects – Maiden, Mother and Crone. Adam Roberts sees the focus on the female aspect as a weakness in the narrative’s aim to overcome duality: “Yet insofar as it attempts synthesis of its carefully distinguished binarisms, *The Mists of Avalon* is not convincing. The bias is always with one half of the opposition. Male collides with female, and our sympathies remain with the female” (Roberts 1998: 61). This bias, however, is not necessarily negative. Although she tries to portray the different characters’ point of view, Bradley does not attempt to be objective, but rather demonstrates that the ideological positions from which we interpret the world vary from person to person. *The Mists of Avalon* is not meant to be a gender neutral book. As Spivack comments, the male characters’ thoughts and actions are described only externally (Spivack 1987: 158). Bradley portrays the myth of Arthur as seen from the female characters’ point of view, with the main narrators being Igraine, Morgaine and Viviane, to make up for the many other Arthurian narratives in which the female characters are given little characterisation. Feminist writers give themselves license to present a feminist agenda, but do not try to hide the ideological position from which they speak.

However, unlike those who occupy the dominant hegemonic ideological bloc – the complex of discourses that defines the contemporary, dominant, conservative positioning (i.e., patriarchal, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, Protestant) - feminist writers acknowledge their ideological status. They do not mystify their own position or pretend to an objectivity or naturalness or commonsense which is itself an ideologically-defined stance. (Cranny-Francis 1990: 78)

A feminist writer with an explicit feminist message, who like Bradley is also concerned with portraying how our view of the world is constructed, should not be expected to hide her sentiments. Morgaine’s introduction emphasises that we live in a world which can be both reconstructed as well as deconstructed if we accept that the reality of consensus is a construct and not an eternal truth.

Fantasy as a genre owes its existence to the reader’s ability to balance the concepts of truth and illusion.

Anti-rational, it is the inverse side of reason's orthodoxy. It reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs and thereby scrutinizes the category of the 'real'. Contradictions surface and are held antinomically in the fantastic text, as reason is made to confront all that it traditionally refuses to encounter. (Jackson in Cranny-Francis 1990: 75)

Bradley exposes the readers to these contradictions of reality. In a work of fantasy one would expect and accept magical creatures to appear. Yet Gwenhwyfar's father Pellinore is much ridiculed for his hunts for what is seen by the other characters as an imaginary dragon. Even after the dragon is killed Pellinore cannot in vindication show its body: "There was no proper bone to it at all, it was all soft like a grub or an earthworm...and it has already withered away to slime. I tried to cut the head and the very air seemed to eat away at it...I do not think it was a proper beast at all, but something straight from hell" (p.621). The characters themselves have problems accepting the reality of something the reader would have no problem believing in as a fantastical element. Even when that reality proves to have sufficient existence to be killed, it is not solid. A fictional world governed by a supernatural causality that allows for magic is also bound by expectations of what can or cannot exist in that society. Cranny-Francis sees fantasy as a harbinger of "the truth that every position available to the individual within a society is a construct of particular ideological discourses"(Cranny-Francis 1990: 78). When Pellinore's dragon is actually proved to exist, it leads to a questioning of other assertions. Bradley thus forces the reader to reflect on the elusiveness of the reality of consensus, and how one character's truth is termed by others to be an illusion.

### **The quest**

The *quest* in fantasy writing is a common structural organisation, centring the plot on a voyage, a search or a task to be undertaken by the hero in order to restore order, goodness or balance in the world. The quest usually has symbolic meaning, dealing with major issues like the relationship between good and evil, individual and society, and freedom and responsibility. It also functions as an inner journey, forcing the hero through a maturing process whereby she discovers her true nature and grows into knowledge of the world. In *The Mists of Avalon* the characters grow into wisdom while they strive towards more or less the same goal – peace in Britain, although they choose different paths to get there. The circular imagery of unity is reinforced through the central character and narrator Morgaine

and her journey through life. As an embodiment of the Goddess – Maiden, Mother and Death-crone, it is Morgaine's prerogative and duty to see the story through to the end, even through the deaths of her loved ones.

Feminist fantasy tends to express the spiritual aspect of a woman's quest differently from that of a man's as the aim is not to achieve transcendence, but connection. Divine transcendence of the earth implies an inferiority of the body and the physical world, and thereby carries with it an inherent organisation of the world into the hierarchical duality which is seen as the root of the subjection of women: "Rather, I believe women's quest seeks a wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death, which have plagued Western consciousness" (Christ 1986: 8). Opposing the patriarchal idea of a male god who can be reached only by transcending the physical world, the Goddess is viewed as an *internal* force that links especially women to the natural world. The quest of several of the female characters is therefore to find the Goddess within. By seeing the Goddess within themselves, the women redefine themselves as aspects of the divine, allowing them self-confidence and the ability to act rather than be acted upon. When Morgaine releases the holy cup of the Druids to become a universal symbol of the holy rather than be kept for the Christian priests, Gwenhwyfar drinks not from a Christian symbol of domination, but from the Mother's cauldron of plenty. Gwenhwyfar is freed to her true self by the Goddess, letting loose the chains of fear that have kept her separated from the living earth:

She knew, knew deep within her heart, that she would never again be afraid to leave the prison of chamber and hall; she could walk under the open sky and on the hills without fear, because wherever she might go, God would be with her. She smiled, disbelieving, she heard herself laugh aloud, and the small, once-imprisoned thing within her asked angrily, *At holy service?* but the real Gwenhwyfar said, still laughing, though no one heard, *If I may not take delight in God, then what is God to me?* And then, through the sweet scents and joy, the angel was before her and the cup at her lips. Shaking, she drank, lowering her eyes, but then she felt a touch on her head and looked up, and she saw that it was not an angel but a woman veiled in blue, with great sad eyes. There was no sound, but the woman said to her, *Before Christ ever was, I am, and it was I who made you as you are. Therefore, my beloved daughter, forget all shame and be joyful because you, too, are of the same nature as myself*". Gwenhwyfar felt that her whole body and heart were made of pure joy. (p. 893-894)

Gwenhwyfar only realizes her own strength and worth as a person when she accepts that the part of the Goddess within her gives her a belonging to the natural world, thereby

denying patriarchal authority over her own self. Ironically, at the point where Gwenhwyfar finally learns to appreciate her independence, she is called upon to give it up. To ensure that the friction between her self and her two loves will not prevent Lancelet from serving as an ally to Arthur in his fight against Gwydion, she gives up her freedom and hides herself away behind convent walls. “And each story, each myth says to her: “There is no place for your desire in our affairs of State”, laments Cixous (Cixous 1987: 67). In this Bradley paints a bleak picture, presenting no alternative for the women but to choose between political power and personal autonomy. If they are to have any influence over others, they must give up their own personal happiness.

One character that never achieves either personal contentment or a say in the state of affairs, is Gwydion. Vivian’s ambitious plot to ensure a future king of Britain of the line of Avalon fails, as in the new Christian Britain Avalon and the Goddess are no longer symbols to unite the people. The son of Morgaine and Arthur fulfils his destiny when he takes on his father in the guise of the ancient ritual – the young stag bringing down the King Stag to take his place and renew the forces of the land. The old order is fading along with Avalon, however, and irrevocably ends with the Normans’ slaughter of the holy deer that were a part of Arthur’s kingmaking. When the people of Britain relinquish their obligations to adhere to ties to the land, they are no longer bound to the Goddess. Gwydion, as a victim of Viviane’s ambition and poor timing, is out of place and out of time: “For what else was I begotten and born, but for this moment when I challenge you for a cause that is no longer within the borders of this world? I no longer even know why I am to challenge you – only that there is nothing else left in my life but for this hatred”(p. 997). Realising that the old order is broken and that Gwydion will never be the kind of king that Britain needs, Arthur kills his son in battle.

Viviane, in her capacity as Lady of the Lake, serves as an embodiment of the Mother Goddess. A mother should influence, but not dominate her family. In a world ruled by the Mother, her servants should abstain from domination over others:

Order is kept in such societies not by the use of force, but by persuasion. And the enforcers act not as kings and legislators, but as mothers.[...] Except in the case of very young children, the mother cannot force her family to be guided by her perceptions; instead she convinces them that her advice is in their best interest. In contrast to patriarchs, moreover, women have been socialized to rule not for their own benefit, but for the families they govern and serve. (Pearson 1981: 273)

When a priestess of the Goddess acts from selfish ambition she cares more for her own ambition than for the people who are in her care, and her plan is doomed to failure. Although the priestesses are close to their deity, they should not presume to understand the long-term wishes of the Goddess. It seems to be Viviane's pride in her power to bring about the birth of Gwydion that has a final part in bringing Arthur down. Crosby indicates that Viviane, in her ambition to steer the future of Britain, has already been corrupted by patriarchal ideas of domination (Crosby 2000: 49). By trying to force the future to become what she wants it to be, Viviane abuses her position as the Mother to the people. What Viviane is reluctant to accept, is that Avalon and perhaps Britain itself, may be part of the great cycle of life. Where theology, the belief in the patriarchal God, sees human existence as a finite precursor to Heaven, thealogy, or study of the Goddess, sees change as essential. "I believe that women's spiritual quest and feminist thealogy are drawing all of us, women and men, to accept finitude and change, to live in and through it, without trying to escape it", says Carol Christ. "For me the goal of the "mystical" quest is to understand that we are part of a world which is constantly transforming and changing" (Christ 1986: xiv). Like Viviane, Morgaine's reluctance to let the Goddess slip into obscurity can be seen as a sign that she has not yet fully reached this level of understanding and acceptance of impermanence. Accepting change, even if it seems devastating to the individual, may be a requirement for living in the inconstancy of the Mother's world.

In finally understanding what Viviane could not accept, Morgaine sees that to be part of nature and partake of the life force of the natural world humans must accept constant change also for themselves. "Every individual is finite and eventually must die, but life also re-creates itself from death. [...] It is not individuals, but the process of life transforming into death into life that is eternal – or so seems from a human perspective. The individual can gain a sense of transcendence from recognizing participation in these larger life and death forces" (Christ 1986: 10). Even with the best intentions to read the will of the Goddess, personal ambition and belief in their own powers to predict always threatens the priestesses' ability to see beyond themselves. They are unable to see what is best or perhaps inevitable for the land and its people, and "one must not confuse the ego's desire for power with the will of the soul, nor mistake the part for the whole" (Crosby 2000: 51). Morgaine herself initially follows in Viviane's footsteps, but is confronted with her failure as both an embodiment of the Goddess to her brother, and a true mother to her own son:

*“What is the Goddess to me?” Arthur tightened his fist on the hilt of Excalibur. “I saw her always in your face, but you turned away from me, and when the Goddess rejected me, I sought another God...” And Gwydion said, looking on me with contempt, “I needed not the Goddess, but the woman who mothered me, and you put me into the hands of one who had no fear of any Goddess or any God”. (p. 998)*

Morgaine realises that she has abused her role as mother to serve her own ambition, and accepts that true power lies only in faith and acceptance of the will of the Goddess rather than in forcing others to do one's bidding. In the end, she comes to see that as the Goddess is forced further away from Britain, she herself carries the Goddess' essence within her as a woman: *“I have called on the Goddess and found her within myself”* (925). Finally, as Arthur and Gwydion lie dying, Morgaine sees herself as embodying all the different aspects of the Goddess:

*I stood in the barge alone, and yet I knew there were others standing there with me, robed and crowned. Morgaine the Maiden, who had summoned Arthur to the running of the deer and the challenge of the King Stag, and Morgaine the Mother who had been torn asunder when Gwydion was born, and the Queen of North Wales, summoning the eclipse to send Accolon raging against Arthur, and the Dark Queen of Fairy...or was it the Death-crone who stood at my side? ( p. 998).*

The result of the long drawn struggle between Christians and Druids is resolved with Avalon heading beyond the reach of this world. However, true to the novels theme of replacing binary values with an ideal of unity, Bradley resolves the story not with the conquest of one religion over another, but rather sketches a future containing aspects of both, in which the Goddess remains on earth now only to be reached through Christian symbols (Shinn 1986: 33). The holy spear of the Druids which has served to protect Britain in the guise of Arthur's sword Excalibur, is thrown into the water of the lake at Avalon, to return to its mystical origins and live on in legend. It has served its function as a symbol of transfer from one age to the next. The holy cup Kevin the Merlin has given to the Christian priests to ensure that some of the holy objects remain accessible in the world even as Avalon itself is becoming less and less real to the people of Britain. Morgaine intervenes at the service however, seeing that the priests intend to use the cup to centre the divine on one truth and one patriarchal god to the exclusion of other beliefs. In becoming the Goddess for a brief moment she sets the chalice outside of time, ensuring that the cup will continue to present an image of the universally divine, as the Holy Grail, the Mother's cauldron, or in whatever form people can relate to. By setting the Grail outside of the now-Christian

world, Morgaine creates a symbol of a common Christian quest, but this also dissolves Arthur's knighthood and is the beginning of the end of Arthur's reign. Crosby sees the Christian quest for the Grail as an obvious lost cause: "A system conceived in duality, as the Christian one ultimately is in practice, can never achieve wholeness when it exists in a state of denial of the feminine" (Crosby 2000: 47). By its very nature, the Grail is something that will make people strive for greatness. However, those who seek excellence through transcendence beyond the physical world that provides the foundation of our existence will never attain it.

Even though Bradley emphasises through the Merlin Taliesin that symbols are arbitrary for those who can see the reality underneath, she also warns of the danger of a society that insists on one truth and one truth only. The power to name is the power to describe what people see. If symbols of male domination are all that are available, the people will eventually neglect to envisage the possibility of another world order. However, the Goddess can never really die while humanity craves what she represents. The fractured, patriarchal world creates a need for connection, unity and belonging. Morgaine finally learns that her work has not been in vain. The Goddess will live on, in essence the same, but in another form. The young novices of the convent on the isle of Glastonbury which has superseded Avalon, remind Morgaine of her own young priestesses: "Here we have the Mother of Christ, Mary the Sinless. God is so great and terrible I am always afraid before his altar, but here in the chapel of Mary, we who are her avowed virgins may come to her as our Mother, too" (p. 1007-1008). Those who seek the Goddess will find her even in patriarchal symbols.

Although *The Mists of Avalon* is seen to present images of female power it cannot be said to advocate personal ambition for those who have the ability to affect change. Igraine's life is sacrificed to produce a strong leader for Britain. Viviane and Morgaine lead lives of deprivation, alienating all their loved ones. Nearly every female character is shown to sacrifice herself for the unity of Britain. However, this is also true for the male characters. It may be as Thompson suggests, that *The Mists of Avalon* "stresses the cost rather than the achievement" (Thompson 1985: 135-6). The myth of Arthur is bound by unavoidable destiny: "Despite all his best intentions, Arthur's tragic destruction must be accomplished. The illusion thus lies in the human hope of escaping the reality of our doom" (Thompson 1985: 138). It is also several times suggested in the book that the painful process of growth is necessary to achieve wisdom, and that Britain's troubles constitutes a symbol of the land learning. This is perhaps true also for the individual.



The female characters seem to have succeeded in their quests when they come to see that they truly embody the Goddess, and through her achieve a connection to the natural world that allows them to partake in the larger unity of existence.

It is tempting to ask why women would need to stress their femininity in order to feel valuable as human beings. Some would see this as an existential angst that can be remedied by insisting that women embody certain valuable abilities simply by being female. Beauvoir speaks of justifying woman's existence, so "she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance" (p. 21). Seeing the Goddess in oneself must be said to constitute divine assistance in this matter. Justifying one's existence as a woman rather than as a human being indicates that one has the right to exist simply by *being a woman*. In a truly equal society there should be no need for gender, but where equality is lacking, women must invoke their status as women to affect change:

It is a paradox of feminist politics that politically, women must act as a group in order to defuse gender as a discriminative status. In the current climate, and no doubt for a long time to come, if women are to gain anything like equal representation in existing institutions, they must push for their rights *as women*. (Lorber 1991: 355)

As Björk points out, because women are treated as a group they also go through many of the same experiences: "Therefore it is *politically* important for feminists to define women as women, as a group. But it is equally important to realise that this group is a construct, not to believe in Woman, but in individual, different women" (Björk 1999: 15. My translation). Björk calls for a double understanding of women, in that woman both does and does not exist as an image. She exists because some problems women encounter more than men, but there should be no ideal image of a Woman with special powers. To infuse women with special characteristics is to treat them as a group based on a feminine "essence" – which is what women have struggled against in a patriarchal society for a long time. "Oppression is not about the existence of a true femininity beyond patriarchy that today is not allowed to be expressed – rather it is about the fact that there even exist demands for women to be "feminine" (Björk 1999: 15. My translation). It is this definition of the individual based on gender that must be the focus for equality. Women need not fight for their worth as *women* as long as they are seen as *people*. But to do this we must give up the image of Woman. Although it is tempting to infuse the "feminine" with equal worth as the "masculine", this is a type of feminism that does not change the

existence of two separate roles that men and women are set to play in society. As Björk points out, a feminism that considers woman's essence to be more important than her position is harmless, and therefore much loved (Björk 1999: 39). Rather than revaluing women's status as women, the long-term goal should be individual freedom from expectations of behaviour:

In my mind, gender equality is too limited a goal. Unless women and men are seen as socially interchangeable, gender equality does not challenge the concept of gender differences that leads to different spheres in the family and marketplace division of labor, which in turn results in women's lesser access to control of valued resources and positions of power. Scrupulous equality of categories of people considered essentially different needs constant monitoring. I would question the very concept of gender itself, and ask why, if women and men are social equals in all ways, there need be two encompassing social statuses at all. (Lorber 1991: 365-366)

It is doubtful how liberating Goddess imagery is for women. In one respect the Goddess is an empowering symbol because any example of women with power to act and affect others is valuable. On the other hand the Goddess represents women's power *as women*, by focusing on the specifically feminine. It is difficult to transfer this abstract idea of women's power into practical life. The danger lies in women worshipping their own femininity rather than daring to become unpopular by focusing on the real-world problems faced by women – not as women, but as *people*.

## ***Woman on the Edge of Time***

*Woman on the Edge of Time* is a utopian rendering of the social protest and subsequent incarceration of a repressed minority woman living in the 1970s New York, and her liberation from the oppression of the present by the escape into the a future society in 2137. The novel was written in 1976, at a time when feminism truly started to centre on opposing repression. "The present wave of feminism grew up in the context of the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, which emphasised liberation and active struggle against oppression" (Birke 1986: viii). The willingness to affect struggle for freedom with violence if necessary, is clearly visible in Piercy's work. By committing the hero of *Woman on the Edge of Time* to a psychiatric hospital Piercy displays the institutionalised oppression of those who protest against the denigration of the marginalised citizens of a society. From the late 1960s psychiatric treatment was subject to massive critique in the United States. During this period, mental illness was by some seen as a protest against society. The fault lay not in the individual, but in the family or society. Many feminists in the 1960s and 1970s saw women as victims of misogyny, either because the stress of existing in a patriarchal society that posited them as the passive Other created mental illness, or because misogyny could be used to label a woman mad and thereby silencing her voice (Ussher 1992: 7).

Piercy's novel is primarily a low fantasy narrative, with events taking place both in the primary and the secondary world. The impact of the novel comes from juxtaposing the two worlds, the realistic world the hero lives in, and the future utopia, to show the great divide between reality and potential ideal. The enormous contrast between the misery of the present and the revolutionary possibility of the future forms the basis of a discussion of how a patriarchal society based on hierarchical duality limits and abuses its individual members (Moylan 1986: 141). Piercy criticises the effects of hierarchical dualistic thinking in the primary world, which has resulted in both women and nature being viewed as inferior, resulting in an abuse of science as an extended tool of human culture to control intractable nature:

"Nature" is often regarded as somehow disorderly, chaotic and intractable; by contrast, our concept of "culture" has come to include the capacity for human mastery over nature. Science too, is implicitly part of that distinction, for it is science that has long promised to give up mastery of our environment, to force nature to yield up "her" secrets. (Birke 1986: 107)

The hierarchical opposition of culture and nature is shown by Piercy to have shaped a society built on violence and greed. The dichotomous split between dualities prevalent in the patriarchal society is also seen as responsible for seeing culture and human evolution as something that cannot be combined with consideration for the natural world. Although Piercy links the dualism to a coupled exploitation of both women and nature, she also indicates that a more unified relationship is possible. The future village of Mattapoissett manages to combine nature and culture, with no signs of opposition because the concept of duality is no longer seen as a governing structural principle for society. Science is used to improve human life, but also to preserve the earth, thereby presenting an example of the harmony possible in a society not built on dualism.

**Synopsis: The Other times three - poor, brown and female**

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy introduces an unlikely hero, a 37-year old Mexican-American woman living on welfare in the New York of the 1970s. Judged by her case history with social workers and the public welfare system, Connie is a poor and uneducated woman, abusive towards her daughter and violent towards other people. Her first husband dies young, her second husband is abusive, and she ends the marriage with an abortion. Teaming up with Claud, a blind musician and pick-pocket, she experiences happiness and a stable family life with her daughter, Angelina. However, when Claud dies from syphilis through a state-run medical experiment in prison, Connie sinks into poverty, hopelessness and depression, followed by drug and alcohol abuse. In grief over Claud's death, and desperate in the face of poverty and degradation, Connie lashes out against her daughter, resulting in Angelina's removal by the social services and ultimate adoption. Finally, when Connie attacks her niece's abusive boyfriend in an effort to protect her niece from being beaten, she is deemed violent and locked up in a psychiatric hospital. Connie is contacted by Luciente, an inhabitant of Mattapoissett, a future village in the US in 2137 based on equality between the sexes, equal distribution of power, ecologically sound living and a general respect and tolerance for the individual and the natural world. Connie escapes the degrading everyday life of the superfluous poor and the captivity of the hospital by mentally escaping to Mattapoissett. Through her visits, Connie learns how to fight back against the system and the people of her own time who try to subdue her to fit uncomplainingly into her role as the marginalised Other. This escalates as Connie is threatened by a mind control experiment at the hospital, geared to control unsociable

behaviour by effectively robbing patients of their free will. Warned by the people of Mattapoisett that the experiment is a precursor that bodes ill for the future, Connie sets out to stop the experiment.

### **The patriarchal world as machine**

The main flaw of Connie's world is presented as a faulty view of human existence as something necessarily based on the domination of other people and the natural world:

I guess I see the original division of labor, that first dichotomy, as enabling later divvies into haves and have-nots, powerful and powerless, enjoyers and workers, rapists and victims. The patriarchal mind/body split turned the body to machine and the rest of the universe into booty on which the will could run rampant, using, discarding, destroying. (p. 204)

It is the combination of duality with hierarchical structuring that is seen as the main culprit for later abuse of power in Connie's society. Mind is considered superior over the body, splitting people off from the natural world, and thereby from other people.

The Western idea of opposing nature and culture is a fairly recent concept. Birke sees the growing market economy in the sixteenth century, with its increasing greed for raw materials, as responsible for banishing the view of nature as a living partner:

Slowly, the views of nature that emphasised cooperation and harmony came up against more and more challenges from the mechanistic world view. Where nature had once been seen as a living organism so, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it became increasingly seen as a machine, whose inner workings could be understood in terms of mechanical analogies. The human body, too, came to be seen as operating according to mechanical laws. (Birke 1986: 114)

This mechanisation of both the human body and the natural world is seen as responsible for the lack of concern for, and abusive domination over other living entities in Connie's society. Piercy is careful to center her critique on patriarchy as a dysfunctional system that encourages denigration and misuse of power.

In a *functional* system, the rules and roles tend to be clear, respectful, negotiable; they can be revised, negotiated, changed. Problems tend to be openly acknowledged and resolved. In a *dysfunctional* system, the rules tend to be confused and covert, rigid and unchanging. A high value tends to be placed on control; dysfunctional systems tend to display an exaggerated rationality and focus on rule-governed reason. [...] Since members of dysfunctional systems tend to have a difficult time getting their basic individual needs met within the dysfunctional system, they tend

to experience anger, frustration, loneliness, anxiety, or confusion within that system. (Warren 1983: 125)

Connie's world is governed by a patriarchal practice of hierarchical duality, which is characterized by separation, restriction and control of its various elements. Domination is seen as necessary to keep a patriarchal society functioning with its "[s]ubordination of the feminine to the masculine order, which gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's functioning" (Cixous c1986: 65). At the point where the reader first meets the hero of *Woman on the Edge of Time* Connie Ramos has reluctantly given up hopes for an education and a job, and has accepted the law of passivity and humility which governs the Other's behaviour. At the age of 37 Connie has more or less resigned to her lot and focuses her strength on surviving on a meagre welfare check.

Connie's world is ruled by men who play their part in the system of domination. The men she meets embody her time's idea of true masculinity as someone who manipulates reality for his own gains. To be deemed successful, it is necessary for a man to accept his place in the hierarchy, as Connie explains: "Well, to get ahead you step on people, like my brother Luis. You knuckle under to the big guys and you walk over the people underneath" (p. 112-113). In the hierarchical system, those who are perceived as weaker than oneself are there to serve the existence of the stronger entity, and women are viewed as naturally weaker than men. A major effort of patriarchy is making women themselves uphold the restrictions imposed upon them in their role as the Other, by creating an impossible image of femininity that women try to fit. Making women feel inferior, or even hate themselves, is a very effective control mechanism, as Hélène Cixous points out in *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove (Cixous c1997: 349).

Being born a woman in a patriarchal society is considered a flaw in itself, and with the expectation that women should loathe themselves for their shortcomings, they are also expected to tolerate abuse for their lack of value. Although Connie protests at direct, physical abuse, she finds it harder to resist the constant messages of her unworthiness she receives within the patriarchal system. Her strength has leaked out as through her life she

has gradually come to judge herself through the eyes of a society that sees her as the unwelcome and unlovable Other. This has destroyed her capacity to care for herself and her daughter:

it hit her that having a baby was a crime – that maybe those bastards who had spayed her for practice, for fun, had been right. That she had borne herself all over again, and it was a crime to be born poor as it was a crime to be born brown. She had caused a new woman to grow where she had grown, and that was a crime.[...] She should have loved her better; but to love you must love yourself, she knew that now, especially to love a daughter you see as yourself reborn. (p. 54)

A woman is from birth considered inferior in Connie's world, and she is made to feel it until she internalises this negative image of femininity. Connie has reluctantly accepted the role of the passive Other for her own sake, but rises up to defend her niece Dolly who lacks Connie's strength. By finally opposing Geraldo, her nieces's boyfriend and the man who destroys her niece by selling her body, Connie stands up to patriarchal expectations that women as inferior beings should tolerate abuse: "Geraldo was her father, who had beaten her every week of her childhood. Her second husband, who had sent her into emergency with blood running down her legs. He was El Muro, who had raped her and then beaten her because she would not lie and say she had enjoyed it" (p. 6-7). Pushed into a corner, Connie strikes out in desperation against Geraldo's violation of her niece, because unlike Connie, Dolly has internalised self-hatred to the extent that she is unable to even attempt to stop others abusing her.

### **The power of naming: Women and madness**

Connie, as a poor, Mexican-American woman, is expected to accept abuse as part of her role as the Other. By exhibiting violence to defend her niece, Connie has taken a dangerous step away from the role of acceptable femininity:

Patriarchy shores up its own position of power by developing a whole series of characteristics which it labels 'feminine' – characteristics such as sweetness, subservience, irrationality – and it then elides any distinction between these culturally derived characteristics and the female body. Patriarchy argues that if you are born a woman, if you have a female body, you will necessarily and naturally exhibit these characteristics. Not to exhibit them [...] is to risk being labelled monstrous, unnatural, antisocial, deviant, mad. (Robbins 2000: 169)

Had Connie been a man she would probably have been allowed to physically defend herself, but by showing aggression she has proved unwilling to follow the rules that dictate

her submissiveness as a woman. When the negative Other displays unsanctioned behaviour and rebels against its role of subservience and passivity, it must be brought back under control by the patriarchal system. One such control system is the label of madness: “For madness acts as a signifier, clearly positioning women as the Other” (Ussher 1992: 11). Those who transgress their appointed role, must be put back in their place and have their powerlessness redefined for them. The patients at the mental hospital are the extreme Other, the duality that proves to those outside hospital walls what they are not. The label of madness is used to define what those with the power to define consider abnormal, by emblematising the opposite of the comforting normality and stability supposed to reign outside hospital walls: “Aliens have a role in our society. They demonstrate to the average individual what he or she should avoid being or even avoid being mistaken for – they define for him the limits of his normality by producing a boundary only inside which he can be secure” (Littlewood and Lipsedge, in Ussher 1992: 140). The purpose of the hospitalised patients is to make others feel that the world they live in is as it should be according to “normal” expectations.

The mental hospital that Connie is brought to is part of a network of institutionalised control over misfits. The patients are those unfortunates who do not fit uncomplainingly into the accepted normality of passivity and abuse in society outside the hospital:

Then the gates swallowed the ambulance-bus and swallowed her as she left the world and entered the underland where all who were not desired, who caught like rough teeth in the cogwheels, who had no place or fit crosswise the one they were hammered into, were carted to repent of their contrariness or to pursue their mad vision down to the pit of terror. Into the asylum that offered none, the broken-sprung bus roughly galloped. (p. 24)

Although nobody would deny that the patients are troubled, their main felony is acting outside of the accepted patterns of behaviour for the socially inferior. Interestingly, the patients eventually chosen to participate in the mind control experiment are all marginalised in some way – such as being a racial minority, a homosexual or a self-proclaimed witch, and yet Connie comments that among the group of human guinea pigs it is Alvin, a white man 42 years old who is “perhaps the closest of those she had met in the hall here to being really mad” (p. 135). The other patients chosen to take part in the experiment are unhappy, troubled and rebellious, but they are not necessarily mentally ill.



In the past, after she hit her daughter Connie voluntarily became hospitalised, believing that her violent response to her own misery and fear of poverty was a sign of illness, something that could be cured. However, Connie quickly learns that she cannot grow well in the hospital system which multiplies the degradation of society outside its walls. In the hospital where any pretence of influence, importance and humanity is taken away from the patients, the pattern of abuse and denigration that caused many of the patients to rebel is especially visible:

The mental hospital had always seemed like a bad joke; nothing got healed there. The first time she had longed for what they called health. She had kept hoping that someone was going to help her. She had remained sure that somewhere in what they called a hospital was someone who cared, someone with answers, someone who would tell her what was wrong with her and mold her a better life. But the pressure was to say please and put on lipstick and sit at a table playing cards, to obey and work for nothing, cleaning the houses of the staff. To look away from graft and abuse. To keep quiet as you watched them beat other patients. To pretend that the rape in the linen room was a patient's fantasy. (p.185-86)

Indeed the function of the mental hospital is not to help the patients, but rather defuse their rebellion against the outside world. The label of "madness" is a comfortable way of defusing rebellion. As Connie says, "the mad are invisible" (p.135), and their opinions can be safely disregarded. Madness is given as an excuse to seize control of the deviant who will not act according to norm: "Poor impulse control has brought this subject into repeated scrapes with society. The very lack of control that has stunted her development, we can provide her" (p. 191). Rebelling against the denigrating role of the Other is interpreted as lack of control, and the doctors and other experts who "negotiate reality on behalf of the rest of society" (Ussher 1992: 140) are given permission by society to take control of the patients' lives, to mould them back into their role as the passive Other.

The power to name or define normality is the power to define how citizens should act in order to be considered normal. Connie, in her hospital incarceration, bitterly complains that no matter what she says, those who are supposedly concerned with her rehabilitation rewrite her sentiments to fit their own ideas: "They trapped you into saying something and then they'd bring out their interpretations that made your life over. To make your life into a pattern of disease" (p. 18-19). This is a method to rewrite reality so it fits one's own preconceptions of what the world should be like, or in the words of Cixous: "They haven't changed a thing: they have theorized their desire as reality" (Cixous c1986: 68-69). Perhaps the greatest gift Connie receives from Mattapoissett is the help to see

herself and her position in her own world through eyes not steeped in self-criticism. Connie redefines herself as a person worthy of respect, and thereby increases her ability to resist those who name her outrage as a deficiency in herself. On her second admission to the hospital Connie is uncooperative because she has now ceased to believe that her protest is a result of illness:

She hated Geraldo and it was right for her to hate him. Attacking him was different from turning her anger, her sorrow, her loss of Claud into self-hatred, into speed and downers, into booze, into wine, into seeing herself in Angelina and abusing that self born again into the dirty world. Yes, this time was different. She had struck out not at herself, not at herself in another, but at Geraldo, the enemy. (p. 11-12)

By naming herself sane, Connie sees her position within the system as the root of her problems, rather than applying the self-regulatory behaviour of the Other to delegate full blame to herself.

Aberrant behaviour can be seen as a reaction to overwhelming social pressure to conform to an impossible role, where those who refuse to accept the normality of consensus ultimately create their own reality. From this perspective, acting out against a diseased system is a sign of a healthy mind striving for individual freedom of expression, as

those who feel crazy, powerless, alone, confused, anxious within and under patriarchy are experiencing what one would expect people trying to get their needs met *within* a dysfunctional system often feel; they are *appropriate responses for one in a dysfunctional and patriarchal system* based on faulty beliefs – beliefs which people trying to stay healthy within such a dysfunctional system are trying to shed! (Warren 1993: 129)

In Connie's world, the principles of separation and domination cause individuals to draw back in fear from other people. Those who protest at this isolation are seen as threats to the working mechanism of patriarchal society. The communication link between Mattapoissett and other societies such as the one Connie lives in, depends upon the receptiveness of "catchers" - people who are mentally open for communication with other worlds. In Connie's world, openness is seen as a sign of weakness, as a chance to give others the possibility to dominate and shape who one should be. Luciente comments on this fear: "Most we've reached are females, and many of those in mental hospitals and prisons. We find people whose minds open for an instant, but at the first real contact, they shrink in terror" (p. 188). The catchers are institutionalised because they cannot function in the

unhealthy environment that constitutes normal society in their worlds, whereas those who have crippled themselves by shutting off from other people are able to function. It can therefore be seen as a sign of sickness in the rest of the society that does not react violently to the world they live in because it is such an unhealthy way of life.

Normal methods of controlling deviants within the psychiatric discourse in Connie's world are defusing and reinforcing the self-regulatory behaviour that prevents the Other from protesting its role. However, this is neither a cost-effective nor lasting method. Rather than relying on a system that regulates the Other's behaviour by devaluing their feelings of discontent, the doctors aim to dispose of those feelings altogether. Opposing intuitive and easily swayed nature is calculated and controlled culture:

Suddenly she thought that these men believed feeling itself a disease, something to be cut out like a rotten appendix. Cold, calculating, ambitious, believing themselves rational and superior, they chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel. From an early age she had been told that what she felt was unreal and didn't matter. Now they were about to place in her something that would rule her feelings like a thermostat. (p. 276)

The lack of control believed to be displayed in nature can be modified by culture, mainly through the instrument of science. If the individual will not control herself, the logical step for the men of science in Connie's world is to apply controlled culture over uncontrolled nature: "Through their use of the tool of science men could uncover and control nature, and, by extension, uncover, and control women" (Ussher 1992: 69).

To more easily control the body, the doctors in the mind-control experiment work on governing the mind, directly taking over control of the patients' actions rather than entrusting them with governing themselves. The experiment focuses on controlling aggression by placing electrodes into the patient's brain to directly change unsociable behaviour. The patients are viewed as mechanical beings; controlling their mind and body is easier than relying on an unstable socialisation process:

You see, we can electrically trigger almost every mood and emotion – the fight-or-flight reaction, euphoria, calm, pleasure, pain, terror! We can monitor and induce reactions through the microminiaturized radio under the skull. We believe through this procedure we can control Alice's violent attacks and maintain her in a balanced mental state. (p. 196)

The dehumanisation and objectification that follows from seeing the patients as machines, make the doctors feel they have the licence to control their objects, even to the extent of

permanently violating the patients' autonomy over their own actions: "Alice seemed closer to being mad than she ever had. She made up stories to account for what she did, because she literally did not know what she would do next" (p. 255). The mind control experiment is thus seen to magnify the existing divide between body and mind.

### **The mothers' world: Unity in multiplicity**

To escape the degrading environment of the hospital, Connie mentally escapes to the future village of Mattapoisett. Luciente, the person who first contacts Connie, is believed by her at first to be a man because she "spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed" (p. 59). Connie is so used to women acting stereotypically feminine, with an emphasis on being on display as the passive object, that she is unable to recognise a woman who does not adhere to the strict dualism of Connie's world.

Mattapoisett, situated in Massachusetts in 2137, is a rural village with decentralised power structures, ecologically friendly agriculture and technology, and full equality between the sexes. Mattapoisett as a society is founded on the principle of unity in multiplicity, in which vastly different individuals are connected into a larger unit, but without dominating the individual person. Disposing of the governing idea of domination is here seen to ensure equality not only on the basis of sex, but in all aspects of life within a society. Where patriarchal dualism attempts to keep women and men apart, adherents of unity want to blend them together. Two opposing forces are replaced by an interconnectedness of all living things, in which individual difference is believed to strengthen the society at large. In Mattapoisett this is most clearly seen through the adage "strangeness breeds richness". This emphasis on unity and the interdependence of all living is visible in all aspects of life in Mattapoisett, as declared in poems and songs:

Only in us do the dead live.  
Water flows downhill through us.  
The sun cools our bones.  
We are joined with all living  
in one singing web of energy.  
In us live the dead who made us.  
In us live the children unborn.  
Breathing each other's air  
drinking each other's water

eating each other's flesh we grow  
like a tree from the earth. (p. 174)

Central to the ideal of unity in multiplicity is the nurturing function traditionally assigned to women, or what can be called "mothering". In the mothers' world individual members are encouraged to display equal concern for others and the natural world as for oneself and the welfare of one's own family as an extension of the self. Mattapoisett is ruled by this ideal of nurturing and communality. Its inhabitants invest much time and energy into the social fabric of their community, to develop all aspects of human existence:

"We learned a lot from societies that people used to call primitive. Primitive technically. But socially sophisticated." Jackrabbit paced, frowning.  
"We tried to learn from cultures that dealt well with handling conflict, promoting cooperation, coming of age, growing a sense of community, getting sick, aging, going mad, dying". (p. 117)

This attention to personal happiness and conflict solving has led to a society which focuses on introspection, conflict resolution, and adapting the needs of the community to the ability of the individual.

In Connie's world, where dualism in a hierarchy is used as a major structuring principle for the society, nature and culture are strictly separated, and science is used to control nature. Mattapoisett, however, is built on an ideal of unity and therefore exhibits none of the oppositions between culture and nature that reign in Connie's time. Science is not viewed as something belonging to man's world of culture, but is seen as a natural tool to enhance human existence, as long as it is used in concord with ecological sustainability. Although Mattapoisett is an agrarian community with focus on ecology, it is also highly technological. The citizens use a kenner, a small wrist-held computer, as a memory bank and to communicate with each other, they use flyers to cover long distances, and the most dangerous or monotonous jobs such as mining or factory work is automated.

As one would expect in a society with emphasis on unity, Mattapoisett is built on a strong communal ideal, both as concerns human society and in relation to the natural world:

Connie smiled, poking the fire idly with a stick that charred at the end.  
"I ask you about I and you answer me about We."  
"Connie, we are born screaming Ow and I! The gift is in growing to care, to connect, to cooperate. Everything we learn aims to make us feel strong in ourselves, connected to all living. At home." (p. 242-243)

Connection to other living entities is constantly stressed as a basis for life as an individual. This communality is not oppressive, however, largely because the “social unit of Mattapoissett is dual: the self and the community or tribe” (Moylan 1986: 130). Attention is given to the welfare of individuals, and they are given the same respect as the community as a unit. This is a typical feature of feminist utopias.

Trained to be nurturing helpmates, women find it easier than men to envision societies in which people cooperate, instead of compete, and nurture, instead of dominate one another. These positive aspects of traditional female conditioning cannot be maximized, however, until they have been separated from the negative aspects of female socialization, which encourage women to be dependent, passive, and self-sacrificing. Citizens of feminist utopias learn to be cooperative and nurturing, but not at the sacrifice of their own fulfilment or growth. All citizens – including mothers – are loved and nurtured as children ideally are, but they also are expected to be independent and responsible, and to nurture others. (Pearson 1981: 273)

Due to the lack of a strong central government, the social fabric of Mattapoissett depends heavily upon the individual cooperation of its members. General rules are therefore tempered by individual needs. One such example is the work of the old woman Magdalena. Although as a rule adults are expected to diversify rather than stay in one post or job for an extended period of time, Magdalena is the permanent head of the children’s house. This is explained to Connie: “Sometimes a gift expresses itself so strongly, like Jackrabbit’s need to create color and form, like Magdalena’s need to work with children, that it shapes a life. Person must not do what person cannot do – you have heard us say this a hundred times; but likewise, person must do what person has to do” (p.128). The necessity to respect individual need or choice acts as a social control for the community, ensuring that all individual members must be content in order for the larger unit to function properly.

Although all citizens have their own home, most aspects of village life are communally based, with emphasis on meetings, festivals and eating together in the “fooder”. Everyone, including children and the old, are expected to work to feed the community. By spreading the work equally over everyone, those powerless in Connie’s world who would have done the drudgery are given opportunity for leisure and comfort, creating less social malcontent and upheaval than in Connie’s time:

How many hours does it take to grow food and make useful objects? Beyond that we care for our brooder, cook in our fooder, care for animals, do basic routines like cleaning, politic and meet. That leaves hours to talk, to study, to play, to love, to enjoy the river. [...] Grasp, after we dumped the jobs telling people what to do,

counting money and moving it about, making people do what they don't want or bashing them for doing what they want, we have lots of people to work. Kids work, old folks work, women and men work. We put a lot of work into feeding everybody without destroying the soil, keeping up its health and fertility. With most everybody at it part time, nobody breaks their backs and grubs dawn to dusk like old-time farmers. (p. 120-121)

The fact that everybody contributes equally to uphold the community, means that they all are given the same opportunity for study and leisure.

In contrast to Connie's world, Mattapoisett has erased biological sex as a differentiating factor of any consequence between men and women. Even in procreation women and men take equal part. Because of the communal ideology a direct biological link between parents and child is seen as unnecessary, and children are normally delivered from a "brooder", a birthing machine. To further escape nuclear bonding the child is lent out to three "mothers" of either sex. Males are able to breastfeed and women usually do not physically give birth, making Mattapoisett in a biological sense as close to true equality as possible. Connie objects to this, however, feeling that the only ultimate power that women had has been given up: "She felt angry. Yes, how dare any man share that pleasure. These women thought they had won, but they had abandoned to men the last refuge of women. What was special about being a woman here? They had given it all up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk" (126). The answer to Connie's question is that there *is* nothing special about being a woman in Mattapoisett. When Connie complains that there is nothing left for women to take pride in anymore, the people of Mattapoisett are shocked at her single-mindedness:

"Birth! Birth! Birth!" Luciente seemed to sing in her ear. "That's all you can dream about! Our dignity comes from work. Everyone raises the kids, haven't you noticed? Romance, sex, birth, children – that's what you fasten on. Yet that isn't women's business anymore. It's everybody's". (p. 245)

Connie is used to the women of her world being judged according to how well they perform tasks reserved for women, whereas the women of Mattapoisett are not expected to perform a feminine role, but are viewed as members of the community on an equal footing with men. With the entrance into a world where men and women can do and be exactly the same things the dualistic division of gender roles is not in use. Mattapoisett contains the "equality of androgyny, that is, an equality of interchangeable differences whereby temperaments and roles traditionally assigned to one sex or another are open to both" (Baruch in Moylan 1986: 127). Both men and women mother, they go on defence, and

have the same job opportunities. The lack of gender roles is also visible in the language of Mattapoisett. Since there is no need to differentiate the sexes, the pronouns “he/she”, and “woman/man” are exchanged for “per”, or “person”, indicating that Piercy has great respect for the power of language to shape our perception of reality.

As in all other aspects of life in Mattapoisett, sexuality is also an area where sharing is viewed as essential. The absence of gender roles, coupled with a general ideal of generosity creates a degree of open-mindedness about sexuality that initially shocks Connie: “Our notions of evil center around power and greed – taking from other people their food, their liberty, their health, their land, their customs, their pride. We don’t find coupling bad unless it involves pain or is not invited” (p. 131). Homosexuality and bisexuality is common in Mattapoisett. Nobody thinks less of a woman or a man for preferring a sexual partner who shares their own biological characteristics, because these characteristics carry no social meaning. Therefore a man is not considered less of a man for preferring a male sexual partner. In the spirit of sharing multiple lovers are common, while at the same time letting individual preference take priority. Those who wish to abstain from sexual activities are allowed to do so without the ridicule and feelings of inadequacy common in Connie’s time.

The communal set-up of Mattapoisett and the use of birthing machines make blood relationships unimportant, thus promoting a sense of responsibility for all the children in the society. All faith and hope for the future is centred on the children, not as an expression of delaying one’s own mortality, but seen as a continuance of the cycle of life for the community: “The children are everyone’s heirs, everyone’s business, everyone’s future”. To this, Connie remembers her own deep poverty and the lack of help from others of her community because nobody saw *her* daughter as the future of Connie’s world: “A flash of dog food supper. She worried, never being able to afford to serve meat after Claud was imprisoned. [...] The only meat she could buy was in dog food cans. Should have fed Angie from a bowl on the floor” (p. 175). The suspicion and distance between the people of Connie’s time are seen to weaken the individual. Blood ties are everything in Connie’s society, and even they tend to be weak, as seen in how Connie’s family relate to each other. In Mattapoisett, however, biological ties are seen as a liability when it comes to disavow hierarchical duality:

It was part of women’s long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally, there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the



power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males would never be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. (p. 97)

It is curious to observe that Piercy sees biology as something that must be *overcome* in order to secure true equality. Seemingly, women and men can never be free to act according to their own wishes and personality as long as women keep both the burden and the privilege of giving birth. This worry for the human body points to what Toril Moi warns is a “pronounced tendency to believe that if we accept that there are biological facts, then they somehow will become the ground of social norms” (Moi c2005: 38). Even in *Mattapoisett*, with its strong emphasis on maintaining the social fabric, social measures are not seen as quite powerful enough to even out an inherent biological duality.

Piercy borders dangerously on biological determinism if she sees biology as such a strong determinant for human behaviour that it cannot be overcome by normal social norms and guidelines. “Biological determinism presupposes a pervasive picture of sex and considers that biology grounds and justifies social norms”, says Toril Moi. “There is no distinction between male (sex) and masculine (gender) or between female and feminine. Whatever a woman does is, as it were, an expression of the ovum in her” (Moi c2005: 20). Supposedly, the ability to nurture in *Mattapoisett* is connected to having an ovum. Women’s biology in terms of procreation is considered so problematic that in order to ensure social equality between the sexes the ovum must be removed to a machine. To escape the restrictions of gender roles, Piercy considers it necessary to change biology itself. This is reminiscent of what Rosinsky calls “gynocentric essentialism” – of seeing women’s supposedly distinct traits as superior to those of men:

Their emphasis on “essential” mental differences between women and men is potentially the mirror image of the androcentric essentialism that has fueled patriarchal stereotypes of women as naturally limited, inferior beings. Instead of perceiving women as inferior, though, proponents of “gynocentric essentialism” view our supposedly distinct traits as superior ones [...]. (Rosinsky 1984: x).

In *Mattapoisett*, women’s biology seems to give them an unfair advantage over the men because having the ability to give birth gives them a stronger mental grounding to the earth and the community.

This may be connected to the concept of mothering in *Mattapoisett*, which is considered a powerful way to influence young people and the world around them. In this sense men are included in the mothering process to give them the same feeling of

connection to the natural world as a female mother is expected to have. In rebuffing burdensome biology this easily it is questionable if Piercy does men any favour. The need for males to become “humanized to be loving and tender” is not a promising image of masculinity in the world outside of Mattapoisett, verging as it does on the generalisation that while women are naturally maternal, men biologically embody domination and aggression.

This shows the problem of how quickly biological essentialism can be turned into determinism. Even when biological determinism is used to advocate laudable qualities for women like nurturing, it offers the potential of using the same argumentation to advance negative characteristics as something tied to biology, such as women’s passivity and men’s aggression. Also, biological arguments tend to work best for the dominant party working to suppress a group less empowered, such as women (Birke 1986: 10). However, biology in itself may be less problematic than our tendency to attach social norms to biological differences. As Toril Moi points out, those who fear “biological facts” are often the ones who see biology as something that inexorably must influence social guidelines (Moi c2005: 42), thus actually siding them with biological determinists. “To avoid biological determinism all we need to do is to deny that biological facts justify social values”, claims Moi (Moi c2005: 43). In many ways this is what the people of Mattapoisett have done, but when it comes to nurturing, they still see biology as a problematic factor in the struggle for equality.

On the other hand, Piercy’s view of masculinity in Connie’s world is very much a question of *acquired behaviour*, something men learn to enact just as women learn to conform to the role of the Other. The patriarchal system affects men as well as women, and those who do well are the ones who act according to expectations of what a man should be. Connie explains to Luciente that in order to be considered a good man, a man of her world must be “strong, hold his liquor, attractive to women, able to beat out other men, lucky, hard, tough, macho we call it” (p. 112). Thus men are also seen as victims of limiting gender roles. If women are expected to be passive yielders, the men of Connie’s world must display constant strength and cruelty in order to survive. For those who choose to obey the demands of stereotypical masculinity, however, the rewards are plentiful: “One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to *feel* superior” (Beauvoir 1997: 24). Dr. Morgan, a junior partner participating in the mind control experiment, enjoys turning the tables on Alice, a strong and stubborn woman he has previously felt threatened by. With the ability to shut down

Alice's rage by the touch of a button, Dr. Morgan is vindicated for his previous feelings of inferiority towards the other doctors. Controlling Alice gives him a welcome illusion of power and admiration:

The only time Connie saw her look like her old self was when one of the doctors came to use her like a demonstration to an interested visitor. Then her eyes shone blood red and she sang long chains of bitter curses until the doctor pushed the button that shut her up. Now that Dr. Morgan had lost his fear of her, there was something ugly in his demonstrations. He particularly liked to stimulate the point that produced in Alice a sensual rush, until once she kissed his hand and told him he was good to her. (p. 254)

The few positive male characters in Connie's own world are the ones who resist expectations to act as an oppressor: "Refusal to pose oneself as the Subject, unique and absolute, requires great self-denial", says Beauvoir (Beauvoir 1997: 25). However, the sympathetic men in Connie's life are short-lived. Her younger brother, her first husband and her boyfriend Claud are all mentioned as kind and caring men who are killed off young by a system in which only the ruthless who obey the role of machismo survive.

The only positive living male character in Connie's world is that of Skip, a homosexual young man brought in to be conformed to the image of acceptable heterosexual masculinity. Skip does not rely on objectifying women to define himself as a man, but by exempting himself from the ideal of true masculinity as machismo he threatens other men who play the part. Brain modification allows them to reform his behaviour into something more controllable: "Because he was too beautiful and tempted them, they had fixed him. He moved differently: clumsily. It was as if he had finally agreed to imitate the doctors' coarse, clumsy masculinity for a time, but it was mastery with them and humility with him" (p. 264). After brain surgery, Skip's behaviour has been modified so he no longer responds to men as sexual objects, which gratifies the doctors: "He told her he felt dead inside. They were pleased with him; they were going to write him up for a medical journal" (p. 264). Believing Skip to be a reformed character, the doctors let him out to "make a life for himself". But Skip refuses to make a life for himself in the image of this warped masculinity, and taking in hand what life he has left, he kills himself.

Abhorrence of domination is visible in all aspects of Mattapoisett. One of the first things Connie notices is the absence of strong centralised control. With its citizens taking turns to act as "government" and with the focus on individual freedom, it is an almost anarchistic society. In this setting it is up to individuals to control themselves so their

actions do not harm others. This requires both “inknowing”, knowing oneself, and “outknowing”, knowing other people and one’s surroundings:

“We aren’t mad to control,” Luciente said, “but we want to prevent overreacting – heart attacks, indigestion, panic. We want to get used to knowing exactly what we feel, so we don’t shove on other people what’s coming from inside.” (p. 132)

This willingness to accept emotions and human imperfection also constitutes a strong contrast to the fear of losing control in Connie’s time. In Mattapoisett madness does not contain the stigma that Connie is used to. Because the social fabric depends heavily on individuals knowing themselves well, it is praiseworthy to want to get to know their inner selves. The individual’s unhappiness and frustration is not seen as an opportunity for others to seize control of that person’s life, and therefore is not considered a weakness. Rather, falling to pieces in Mattapoisett is seen as personal growth, an opportunity to rebuild oneself in a more profitable way:

Our madhouses are places where people retreat when they want to go down into themselves – to collapse, carry on, see visions, hear voices of prophecy, bang on the walls, relive infancy – getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind. We all lose parts of ourselves. We all make choices that go bad...How can another person decide that it is time for me to disintegrate, to reintegrate myself? (p. 58)

Mattapoisett does not – as is common in so many utopias – come across as such a perfect society that it becomes restrictive to its citizens. The repression of feelings often seen in utopian renderings to promote equilibrium is not an ideal in Mattapoisett. Feelings are seen as part of human existence, part of the willingness to listen to other voices than that of calculated reason. Jealousy, war and violence still exist. Although rehabilitation is attempted for a first-time offence, Mattapoisett practices capital punishment for second-time murder. Theft is rare because individuals have few personal possessions. It is indicated that if someone should steal, others would think this action spoke of want and neglect from the community, and would therefore give the thief what they thought he or she needed. The communal set-up of the society means that in terms of material possessions citizens can borrow clothes, paintings and other communal values for a time from a lending library, owning them for a short while, and then pass them on to others. In the mothers’ world the whole family is equally cared for.

## Ecological sanity

The ideal of unity visible in the human population of Mattapoisett is also extended to other living creatures. Communicating with animals has become a common feature of human life, and when plans are made that affect animals or the environment in general, special human representatives are appointed to speak on their behalf. All plans for the future are made with all living in mind: “We have limited resources. We plan cooperatively. We can afford to waste...nothing. You might say our – you’d say religion? – ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees” (p. 117). This grounding to the earth is seen as necessary to allow individuals to orient themselves to their place in the world they live in. Birke reminds us that the duality responsible for seeing the natural world as something inferior needing human control is neither a universal nor an inevitable feature of human existence:

The nature-culture dichotomy is so prevalent in contemporary Western thought that we tend to take it for granted without seriously beginning to challenge it. We tend to conceive of nature as something being “out there”, something which humans can influence, rather than something of which we are part. [...] Many societies [...] see their culture as embedded in, and in a significant part of, nature: the latter in turn may be portrayed as living in harmony with human society rather than being distinct from it.” (Birke 1986: 108)

The common hierarchical division between nature and culture does not have to be incorporated in a society which is not governed by a principle of duality. Science as an expression of culture need not be an all-male endeavour, and can be used to protect the natural world as well as enhance human life if used with care and consideration for others. The people of Mattapoisett do not see an opposition between nature and using science as an extension of culture because they have espoused dualism to the point that nature and culture do not interfere with each other.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the manner in which the characters treat their surroundings becomes emblematic of how they relate to other people. Exploitation of the natural world equates how those in power abuse fellow human beings. Those low in the hierarchy serve the more powerful, without regard for their wellbeing, just as the natural world exists to provide for the greedy population of Connie’s world. The disrespect which those in power show their surroundings is evident in how the poor and recalcitrant are treated. When Connie is taken to the hospital she realises it is a dumping place for undesirables: “Little was recycled here. She was human garbage carried to the dump.” (p.

24). Life is cheap and easily replaced in Connie's world. The individual is not important except to keep society going:

"We wear out so early," she said to the mirror, not really sure who the "we" was. Her life was thin in meaningful "we"s. Once she had heard a social worker talking about Puerto Ricans, or "them" as they were popularly called in that clinic (as were her people in similar clinics in Texas), saying that "they" got old fast and died young, so the student doing her field assignment shouldn't be surprised by some of the diseases they had, such as TB. It reminded her of Luis talking about the tropical fish he kept in his living room, marriage after marriage: Oh, they die easily, those neon tetras, you just buy more when your tank runs out. (p. 27-28)

Another example of ecofeminism's mirror image of the exploitation of women and the natural world is Connie's brother and his greenhouse industry, in which Connie and other labourers have worked without proper protection from the toxins. The plants that are forced up using highly toxic chemicals reflect the patients at the mental hospital who are constantly given high doses of strong drugs to keep them within the expected pattern of behaviour.

One of the main points in *Woman on Edge* is the importance of grounding to the earth as a measure of relating in a healthy way to oneself, as well as to other people and the world we live in. Nature is described as something that anchors people in an existential way: "Place matters to us [...]. A sense of land and base and family. We're strongly rooted" (p. 116). Being rooted to the land helps the individual understand how she/he fits in the larger scheme, creating a secure base of home and a way to orient themselves in the world. As a contrast, the people of Connie's time are sorely lacking in a sense of belonging, creating insecurity and hostility towards others. In Mattapoisett being rooted to the land seems to be associated with the concept of mothering. Becoming "mothers", i.e. embracing the concept of nurturing like a woman, seems to be a requisite to experience the closeness to nature that grounds people enough to make them feel happy and safe. The idea that women are more capable of nurture than men because they are biologically able to give birth hints at a reasoning at least partly based on biological determinism. It could be argued that interpreting values such as nurturing and respect for the individual as specifically female characteristics say more about the interpreter than the text, and yet Piercy's emphasis on men having to become "mothers" implies that she sees women's biology, or at least their ability to give birth, as connecting them more deeply to the earth than men in our society. It also implies that somehow the nature of men has to change in order to fit a society like Mattapoisett, necessitating men's advance into at least a virtual

sense of motherhood in order to learn to connect to other living entities. This manner of assigning women special characteristics simply because they are women, and connecting these characteristics to nature, does much to strengthen the dualistic divide that has been so damaging in patriarchal societies (Birke 1986: 122). If women are believed to have a special mental affinity with nature because of their place in the reproduction process it is difficult to see how men could share this connection in a society which is locked into a biological duality.

A vital point in Piercy's description of Mattapoisett is that it is not a future predestined to happen. The future is frail, and depends on what the individual does or accepts in her or his time (Moylan 1986: 136). People may be called upon to make a choice like Connie to fight for Mattapoisett to come into existence. It is indicated by Luciente that events in Connie's world will decide what happens in the future. "We could put it: at certain cruxes of history...forces are in conflict. Technology is unbalanced. Too few have too much power. Alternate futures are equally or almost equally probable ...and that affects the...shape of time" (p. 189). If the people of Connie's time continue to distance themselves from their humanity by the general disrespect and abuse they show all living, Mattapoisett may be replaced by a very different future.

The insistence on domination and separation in Connie's world has led to a separation between people and the natural world they live in, creating a lack of grounding to the earth. Consequently, the resulting insecurity and coldness to other people may affect the future of events. Because the people of Connie's world do not feel secure in this type of dysfunctional society they need to become even more suspicious and controlling, creating a vicious circle of domination and fear. Science, without being tempered by reason and empathy, is misused to control other people, ultimately leading to the experiment of controlling human behaviour in which Connie is enrolled at the mental hospital.

At a point where the mind control experiment seems to be succeeding, Connie fails to enter Mattapoisett, and instead ends up in an alternative to Mattapoisett, a future dystopia where people by the help of technology have moved themselves into a society geared on the destruction of its citizens (Moylan 1986: 144). This alternate future has taken hierarchy and domination to the extreme, resulting in a pollution so heavy that only the very poor are forced to live on the earth's surface. Multinational corporations control the individual through electronic implants and the use of cyborgs. A powerful master class residing on space platforms to avoid the earth's polluted atmosphere has seized the power to decide the fate of a servant class of people. It is a society of warped

sexuality in which the sexual exploitation of women in Connie's time is taken further with short-term sexual contracts for women, who are in turn required to undergo grotesque bodily modifications to please the men who have picked up their contracts.

Connie meets Gildina 547-921-45-822-KB, a parodied exaggeration of the constructed femininity of Connie's time. Unlike the people of Mattapoisett who do not have surnames because they can tell each other apart, in Gildina's world everyone has a number, indicating how impersonal this society has become. Gildina lives in ultimate isolation high above the earth, locked in an apartment by the man who has bought her contract. Contact with other people is replaced by recreational drug use and entertainment units echoing the violence of the society that made them.

The mind control experiment of Connie's time is a precursor for the universal control of citizens and abuse of technology that may lead to Gildina's world, as is explained to Connie:

It's that race between technology, in the service of those who control, and insurgency – those who want to change the society in our direction. In your time the physical sciences had delivered the weapons technology. But the crux, we think, is in the biological sciences. Control of genetics. Technology of brain control. Birth-to-death surveillance. Chemical control through psychoactive drugs and neurotransmitters. (p. 216)

It is in this face of science as an expression of harmful control exercised by patriarchal culture that adherents of ecofeminism feel women can and should speak up for nature. Women's role in the reproduction process is seen as a further tie encouraging nurturing, thereby obligating women to defend the natural world (Birke 1986: 118). This emphasis on women defending nature against the ravages of culture implies a worrying duality of its own, as it indicates that women are more strongly connected to nature than to culture. It is "a belief that feminism, because of its commitment to "female" values, might provide some sort of salvation from the excesses of science as we know it. [This belief] is founded upon ideas of the intrinsic "femaleness" of nature, and of femininity as both intrinsic to women and fundamentally desirable" (Birke 1986: 116). Nature is seen as something ultimately belonging to women, and femininity is indelibly fused with nature, justifying the continued dual association between women and nature.

As an opposition to the unequal life spans of the various classes in Gildina's world, the people of the future in which Mattapoisett exists have accepted their place in the cycle of life. To retain ecological sustainability, the population number must be controlled.



Rather than expand their own lifetime, most of the people of Mattapoisett wish for a chance to mother children themselves, and the only way to allow children to be born is for others to die. In the true spirit of Mattapoisett, the community has decided by vote not to artificially extend human life. Connie, who immediately sees only what *can* be done, and not what *should* be done with the help of technological advances, protests against this acceptance of the finitude and restrictions of life:

“You still get sick. You grow old. You die. I thought in a hundred and fifty years some of these problems would be solved, anyhow!”

“But Connie, some problems you *solve* only if you stop being human, become metal, plastic, robot computer. Is dying itself a *problem*?” (p. 117)

Piercy reminds us that human existence is not meant to constitute perfection in the sense of transcendence from the physical world. Humanity in itself, flawed as it is, is not something we need to flee if we accept the vulnerability binding us to the natural world. Contrary to Mattapoisett, in the alternate future inhabited by Gildina, the few in power have chosen to extend their life using organs from the poor, in what amounts to cannibalism. They have indeed solved the problems inherent in being human, but at the terrible cost of losing their own humanity.

### **The quest**

Connie’s visit to Gildina’s alternative, dystopian future shows her what can happen when the need to control others is joined by the ability to do so through the abuse of science. She comes to realise that the future depends on her actions in the present. Connie initially enters Mattapoisett as an escape from the confinement and degradation of the mental hospital, but eventually she comes to see that the villagers of Mattapoisett depend upon her just as she depends upon them. The people of Mattapoisett implore the people of Connie’s time to join together to guide their society in the right direction. It is a call to unify arms: “You individually may fail to understand us or to struggle in your own life and time. You of your time may fail to struggle together. [...] We must fight to come to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens. That’s why we reached you” (p. 189-190). This is an appeal for people to take action, and to realise the power they could have if they choose to exercise it.

The theologian Carol Christ sees the inner, spiritual aspect of the quest as equally important as the outer, action-oriented task. The *spiritual quest* “concerns a woman’s awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe” (Christ 1986: 8). For Connie, the spiritual quest allows her to take action in the physical world. Her visits to Mattapoisett change her perception of herself and her place in the world. Connie’s initial disappointment in realising that there is nothing special about being a woman in Mattapoisett is transformed into wonder when she sees that although this is a society that does not judge or value her as a woman, it sees her as a member of society on an equal basis with other society members. Relieved from the pressure to conform to a feminine role, Connie is allowed her individuality, because she is not defined according to a pre-set role and strict code of behaviour based on biological sex.

But no feminist perspective has kept clearly in focus the revolutionary aim of restructuring social institutions without a division of human beings into the social groups called “men” and “women”. Liberal feminists have concentrated on espousing equality between the two groups, but not eliminating them as significant social categories. Radical feminists have emphasized the positive aspects of women’s traditional qualities, and so have polarized women and men. (Lorber 1991: 359-360)

This polarisation between men and women perpetuates existing expectations of women as beings who should complement men. The idea that women are what men are not is a conception that has made women into the objectified Other. Although there is now more focus among critics on how gender regulates our behaviour, few are concerned with doing away with gender altogether. Piercy presents a society which does not rely on gender roles, because biological duality is not given sociological value. Mattapoisett gives an idea of what a world could look like that does not define its citizens according to their biological sex, but rather as individuals with unique strengths and abilities. The acceptance Connie meets in Mattapoisett helps her stop accepting the negative image of herself as a woman that a patriarchal society has forced upon her. Connie has become a whole person, body and mind, a woman who trusts her own strength and judgement.

Connie’s spiritual victory in accepting her value as a complete human being unleashes her strength and extends her quest to the physical world she lives in. Connie’s ability to act out in her own time is the main reason for why she was contacted by the people of Mattapoisett: “We can’t make things come out of the past. We can only speak to those who listen” (p. 188). It is indicated that a 30-year war was necessary to free people

from the oppression Connie lives in. This war culminated in the revolution that created Mattapoisett. With universal control of those who would protest, this revolution may not take place, and as a consequence Mattapoisett would cease to exist. To preserve free will and the ability to speak out against oppression it is therefore imperative that Connie stop any further experimentation on mind control.

After a failed escape attempt Connie is brought back to the hospital and forced to undergo the implanting of electrodes in her brain, but bolstered by encouragement from Mattapoisett she does not give up her rebellion. Connie decides to fight back, in a sequence which blends together the battles of the present and the future against oppression:

She glanced around and saw all the enemy floaters zeroing in on them as if summoned to this attack. As she stared to left and right she saw that they were piloted and manned by Judge Kerrigan, who had taken her daughter [...] all the caseworkers and doctors and landlords and cops, the psychiatrists and judges and child guidance counselors [...] all the other flacks of power who had pushed her back and turned her off and locked her up and medicated her and tranquilized her and punished her and condemned her. (p. 330)

At this time, Connie's determination lets her stay for extended periods of time in Mattapoisett while her body remains unconscious in the hospital. Fearful of her unexplained unconsciousness, the doctors remove the electrodes from her brain, but Connie realises that although she is temporarily safe, drastic measures rather than passive resistance is now needed: "The war raged outside her body now, outside her skull, but the enemy would press on and violate her frontiers again as soon as they chose their next advance. She was at war" (p.331).

Connie's quest becomes a mix of her own need to fight back against those who threaten her, and to fight on behalf of the future of Mattapoisett. In a last desperate act to end the experiment and its implications for the future, Connie, while on a visit to her brother's family, steals some of the pesticide used in her brother's greenhouse production. Her intention is to kill the doctors working on the experiment by poisoning their coffee. Thus in an ironical twist science is responsible for the death of science corrupted: "But this was a weapon, a powerful weapon that came from the same place as the electrodes and the Thorazine and the dialytrode. One of the weapons of the powerful, of those who controlled" (p. 357). Although Piercy describes the utopian existence as relatively peaceful, she allows the people of Mattapoisett to advocate active resistance when necessary: "Power *is* violence. When did it get destroyed peacefully? We all fight when

we're back to the wall – or to tear down a wall” (p. 365). It is difficult to know if Luciente and the others in Mattapoisett approve of Connie's intention to murder. In the time just before her attack, Connie finds it harder to enter Mattapoisett, and although she tells them of her plans, she loses the connection before she learns their opinion. Connie herself believes that her failure to reach Mattapoisett is caused by her preparation to perform murder:

She thought of Luciente, but she could no longer reach over. She could no longer catch. She had annealed her mind and she was not a receptive woman. She had hardened. But she thought of Mattapoisett.

For Skip, for Alice, for Tina, for Captain Cream and Orville, for Claud, for you who will be born from my best hopes, to you I dedicate my act of war. At least once I fought and won. (p. 370).

The intent to murder, to tear apart the web of all living, seems to isolate the individual from the surrounding world.

The final chapter of the novel shows excerpts of Connie's medical history, suggesting that her incarceration as a dangerous patient will continue within the hospital system. The bleak, open ending of the novel does not specify whether or not the assassination attempt worked or if it ended the experiment. The abrupt ending of Connie's narrative, replaced by the “official” interpretation of her behaviour, forces the reader to take a stand on both Connie and Mattapoisett. Connie, as seen through her medical charts, is a violent, confused schizophrenic. It is possible to see all of Connie's visits to Mattapoisett as hallucinations resulting from a shattered mind. The reader is placed before a rather unsettling choice: When tested with an alternate version, do we accept Connie's narrative point of view? Do we *believe in Connie*? Or do we side with the opinion that Connie is not to be trusted, that Mattapoisett cannot exist and that Connie's world of oppression and despair is all there is and could be?

This abrupt confrontation between narrative points of view Rosinsky sees as a reminder to the reader that our preconceptions of the world shape the way we look at events, or even what we choose to record. Inconsistencies in the reports about Connie's background and age “indicate that “official” observers may be as biased, as narratorially unreliable as a potentially insane character” (Rosinsky c1984: 95). Because Connie is viewed as dangerous and confused, all her opinions and impressions of the world are deemed unreliable, and this colours how she is perceived within the hospital system: “Did they think you had to be crazy to protest being locked up? Yes, they did. They said

reluctance to be hospitalized was a sign of sickness, assuming you were sick, in one of these no-win circles” (p. 9). Whether one believes Connie’s narrative or not it is important to bear in mind that the “official” recordings of Connie’s life are products of a society which Bradley presents as being the result of a dysfunctional system based on abuse and collective corrections of opinions.

Although her attempt at murder leaves the future bleak for Connie herself, it is not necessarily a negative pointer to the future. Perhaps it is immaterial if Mattapoissett comes into existence or not if it is the *image* of utopia that can free the individual rather than utopia itself:

It is the practice of utopian discourse itself that *Woman on The Edge of Time* ultimately celebrates. It is not the system of utopian society as seen in the admittedly exciting images of life in Mattapoissett that reveals the power of utopia but rather the impact of utopian dreams and experience on the protagonist that is the primary utopian mechanism in the text. The power of dreams to help change the historical current is the key formal message that joins with the similar message of both the ideologeme and the iconic images of the novel. (Moylan 1986: 150-151)

Seen from this angle, the novel is hopeful for the future. Taking into consideration that Connie is given no physical or practical help from Mattapoissett, she is a remarkably competent and self-sufficient hero. Piercy’s main message seems to be to stress that if we believe in the future, enslaving passivity can be shed to expose the wonderful capability for effecting change that resides in all people. If we use the better parts of human nature there is nothing that cannot be accomplished. However, change depends upon both the individual making a stand and also working together with others to form collective action.

It is the power of belief that is celebrated, the faith in a better world that is necessary to invoke the strength and hope of individuals to change the world as we know it. This is the greatest gift of fantasy, as “dreams do demonstrate what does not yet exist and move us beyond the insufficiency of the present” (Moylan 1986: 154). *Woman on the Edge of Time* aims not only to show alternative realities, but also to infuse the reader with the belief that change is possible. Building a society that encourages the ability to dream as well as the willingness to take action to ensure that the dream comes true may improve both the present and the future.

## Conclusion

For this is the thing the priests do not know, with their One God and One Truth: that there is no such thing as a true tale. Truth has many faces and the truth is like to the old road to Avalon; it depends on your own will, and your own thoughts, whither the road will take you, and whether, at the end, you arrive in the Holy Isle of Eternity or among the priests with their bells and their death and their Satan and Hell and damnation (x-xi)

So Bradley lets Morgaine state the essence of *The Mists of Avalon*. There is no ultimate truth we all must obey, but rather we shape reality to suit ourselves. In other words – we find what we expect to find. Just as the characters of Bradley’s work of fiction limit themselves to allow only the existence of what they believe in, so the world the reader lives in is a construct shaped by ideology and beliefs. One person’s perception of what is “true” or “real” is another person’s lie, and if we allow others to define what is true for us we must live with the consequences. However, we must be able to see that there are alternatives to the world we know if we are to change it. “We can only know what we can truly imagine. Finally what we see comes from ourselves”, says Luciente to Connie in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (p. 322). The ability to dream is the ability to construct a potentially different reality to the one we live in. Those who limit themselves because they allow others to define their reality are doomed never to dream of dragons. This is the mission of fantastic fiction – to open up for possibilities that seldom or never appear in the real world, and to make us see that what we dream of can be equally valuable to what we think we know to be true. Feminist fantastic fiction also rewrites the reality we know, either by showing existing myths from another perspective, such as Morgaine’s rendering of the story of Arthur, or by showing the power of individuals to change perceptions of themselves, such as Connie in her visits to Mattapoisett.

The quest for unity is very important in feminist fantastic fiction. Unity of existence between mind and body, between people and the natural world they live in, and between the people of a human society. Belonging to a society is seen as supporting the individual, but only when proper consideration is shown for all the separate parts of the whole in addition to the larger group as an entity. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* the principle of patriarchal, hierarchical duality is presented as separating humans from the natural world, creating feelings of division, isolation and a general fear of others that leads to domination and abuse of those considered weaker than oneself. In *The Mists of Avalon* a way of life

based on close communion with the natural world and a respect for women as embodying the Mother Goddess' life force is replaced by views of the body and the natural world as inferior entities that need to be controlled and transcended to realise the potential of a human being. The resulting split between nature and human culture is presented as a major factor in the oppression of women because of their close association with the natural world.

Although these novels are not directly comparable, it seems that both narratives focus on fellowship and caring for the community and the natural world, but they do so in very different ways. In *The Mists of Avalon* the individual must sacrifice personal fulfilment in order to contribute to the community. Thus the caretaking function traditionally associated with women is shown to subsume the individual in order to protect the larger group. By contrast, in *Woman on the Edge of Time* taking care of the community is highly important, but there is still made room for individual happiness. The inhabitants of Mattapoisett are very careful that the individual should not suffer on behalf of the group, unlike the Goddess worshippers of Avalon. There is not the same feeling of necessary sacrifice of the individual on behalf of the group in Mattapoisett as in Avalon, although this could be because by the time Connie arrives it is indicated that the people of Mattapoisett have been through a 30-year long war as well as a revolution, which has set up a society in which there is room for both individual and group. In Connie's time, the individual may be called upon to sacrifice their own self for the future good of the community. Piercy emphasises the importance both of taking collective action, and of the individual's choice to participate in the revolution. Her emphasis on the future not being fixed shows the importance of Connie's active choice in ending the experiment by risking her own self. Unlike many other depictions of the heroic quest the real-life setting of Connie's world emphasises that she is no mythic heroic character, but merely a normal human being. If Connie can perform her act of rebellion against a society based on the abuse of its citizens, without any magical powers or any type of help apart from the encouragement of people of the future, then the reader ought also to be able to take action. Both novels indicate that in order to create a society with respect for the individual one must perhaps go through a self-sacrificing stage.

Seeing women as more closely connected to the natural world than men can either create an association viewed as a source of feminine power, or a way of perpetuating existing dualities which separate culture and nature as well as men and women. Both novels focus on the ties of human beings (and especially women) to the natural world as a

source of strength and connection. *The Mists of Avalon* does so very much with its emphasis on Goddess worship through the body, in which the Goddess is an expression of the universal life force found in nature, whereas *Woman on the Edge of Time* sees a grounding to the earth as a way for human beings to orient themselves metaphysically, in relation to self and others.

Nature in *The Mists of Avalon* is seen to take on authority over human society. Nature is not only to be respected, but deferred to as an expression of the universal life force hailed through images of the Goddess. Imagery of the Goddess may *seem* to be empowering for women in that it presents an example of female power, but it also risks perpetuating the duality in which women are associated with nature and men with culture, as it focuses on women's power stemming from the natural world. In Bradley's fictive Britain, in a society which equates images of female strength with true execution of power, images of the Goddess have very direct effects on the characters' lives. However, for the reader, the Goddess imagery has little practical effect other than implying that there exists an eternal feminine power, a "principle of woman" or supposedly innate feminine qualities that all women embody. This focus on the "feminine divine" is gynocentric essentialism - seeing women's supposedly special characteristics as more positive than those of men, a concept that stands in danger of seeing gender roles as expressions of biological "truths" that necessarily will shape the individual woman's life. The danger in this close association between women and nature lies in seeing women as separated from culture when duality is not challenged as a governing aspect of a society. Also, seeing a biological duality as something that should necessarily influence human culture is merely to reverse the hierarchy in which culture dominates nature.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time* the desired connection to nature is taken to include everyone – both men and women. This is because the dualistic rift between nature and culture in Connie's time is displaced in Mattapoisett by the focus on unity. Where duality is not an acceptable structuring principle for a society, the association between women and nature ceases to have value to denote women as a group - whether the intention is to devalue or to empower the feminine. Because biological markings in Mattapoisett carry no corresponding sociological significance, there is no need for women to argue their value as *women* rather than *human beings*. However, women's biology is by the inhabitants of Mattapoisett still regarded as problematic, as the ability to give birth is seen as giving a deeper grounding to the earth. The fact that men must necessarily become "mothers" in order to fit into utopia signifies either that Piercy considers men's biology in Connie's



world to be responsible for the aggression and domination of that society, or that serious social remedies are needed to overcome deep-set gender roles. The general greed of Connie's world is shown as something that can be overcome through a deeper respect for the land and other people. Mothering ensures this connection and benefits both individual and society, but the ability to mother is in itself not restricted by biology in Mattapoisett. Biology is thus seen as responsible for shaping behaviour to some extent, although nature's duality in creating two biological sexes can be evened out by careful use of technology. There is in Mattapoisett a respect for the natural world, but they do not let nature govern culture. Indeed, there is no need for any kind of domination because culture and nature are seen as blended rather than in opposition, and therefore there is no need for hierarchy to relate one part of the duality to the other.

Where *The Mists of Avalon* to some degree advocates androcentric essentialism by focusing on the Goddess as a symbol of the mother's power over creation, *Woman on the Edge of Time* features an androgynous world in which the individual is not defined according to either biological sex or gender roles. In this, the inhabitants of Mattapoisett seem to have succeeded in Björk's entreaty that "to be a woman should not be something good – it should be something uninteresting. Only then can we be free to shape our identity irrespective of biological sex [...] Feminism does not need to be conscious of woman's *essence*, it needs only to be conscious of her *position*" (Björk, p. 14 My translation).

The 1970s and 1980s produced quite a large production of feminist fantastic fiction focusing on what was special about being a woman to act as counterweight for male denigration. Today fantastic narratives tend to be less dogmatic than their predecessors. Often the feminist elements lie simply in narratives that present female heroes and well-developed characterisation. Writers such as Tanya Huff, Mercedes Lackey and Sheri S. Tepper all incorporate feminist elements into their books, without necessarily making this the main feature of the narrative.

Fantastic fiction as a genre is concerned with the fluidity of reality, and the right to redefine a reality that is the result of a constructed consensus rather than a static truth. "To say that Woman with a capital W does not exist is not to deprive feminism of political power [...] It is to place politics *not* in the rights of the true woman, but in the power to create and define what femininity is" (Björk p. 14). In the same manner, fantastic fiction claims the right to create and define a reality that lies beyond the restrictions of what we experience in the real world in which we make our home. In *Avalon* the mother's world is past, and in Mattapoisett it may be coming, but in the mean time the meeting of feminist

critique with fantastic fiction may result in dreams of dragons that produce results even in the reader's own world.

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